Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park

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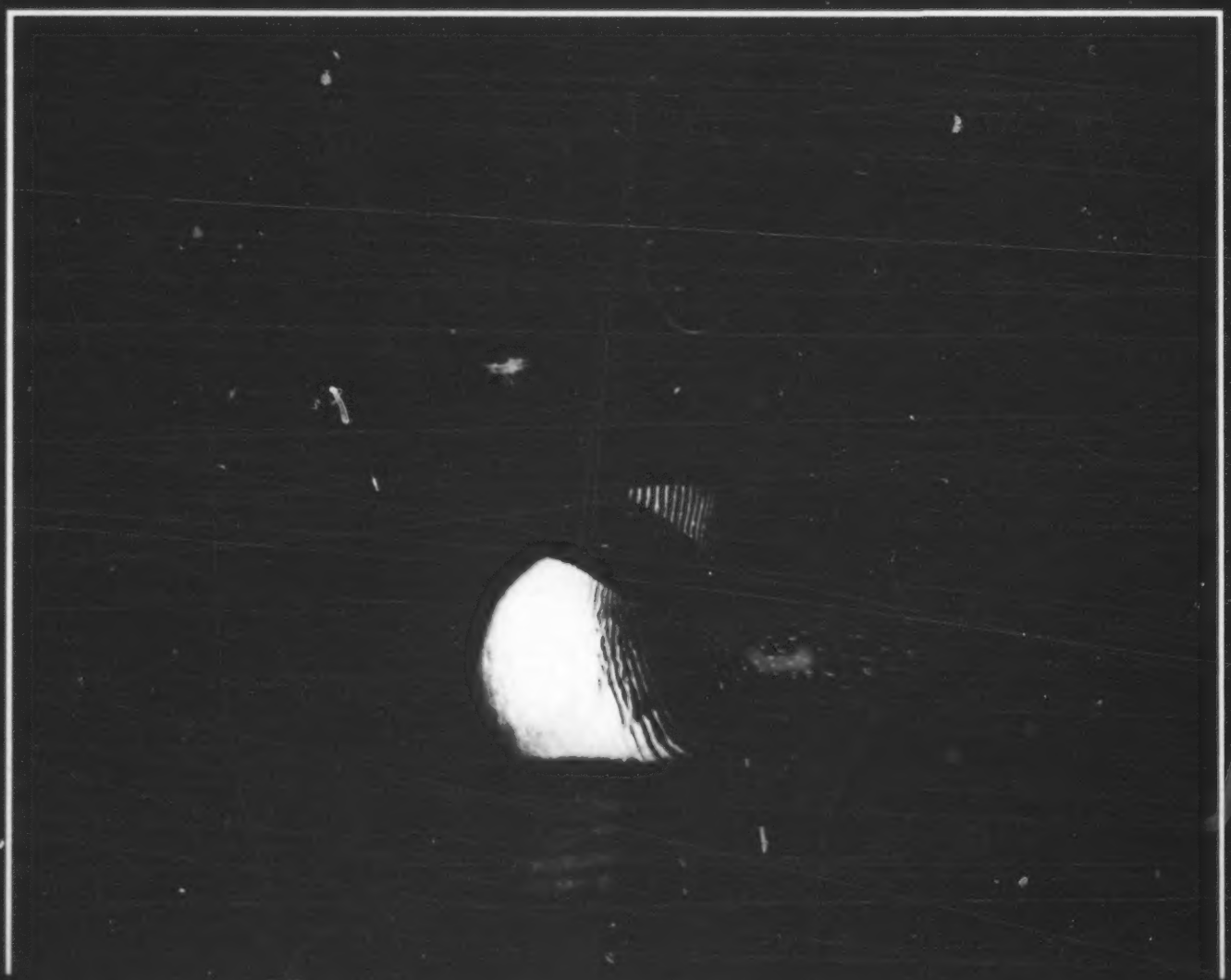

Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park

1990

By Dan Strickland

With the **technical advice and assistance** of Ron Tozer

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Cover Photo: An adult Common Loon with a small perch for its young photographed on Joe Lake by Gustav Norra.

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James M. Richards

Northern Spruce bogs form in Algonquin when a mat of floating vegetation grows out over a sheltered body of water. At first the mat supports only shrubs but later a forest of Tamarack and Black Spruce.

James M. Richards

Bringing food to nestlings.

Dan Strickland

Gray Jays are often tame.

Dan Strickland

Gathering feathers for her nest.

James M. Richards

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher lives in treed part of bog.

Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park

Many visitors to Algonquin Park are unaware that it offers a unique opportunity for seeing and hearing the birds of Ontario. The 258 species that have been recorded here so far make a rather modest list compared to the ones compiled at some southern Ontario locations, but the number of birds that actually live and nest in the Park (as opposed to merely passing through in spring and fall migrations) is very impressive indeed. A full 134 species have been known to breed here and, of these, 90 are considered to be common summer or permanent residents.

Few other locations in Ontario could make a similar claim, and the reasons for the Park's extra rich diversity in birds are, therefore, of considerable interest. The basic factor is that Algonquin lies in a transition zone between the hardwood forests of the south and the cool evergreens of the north.

Both these major forest types meet and can be found side by side at hundreds of places within the Park's boundaries. The northern coniferous forests are accentuated even more in Algonquin by the fact that the park lies on a broad dome whose elevations reach as high as 585 metres (1900 feet) above sea level and are typically 200 metres (650 feet) above the surrounding country. This makes for a colder, wetter, and snowier climate in the Park that favours northern trees like spruce and balsam and, along with them, their characteristic bird species as well. Thus, we have such northern birds as the Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, and Spruce Grouse here in Algonquin and at the same time such southerners as the Indigo Bunting, Brown Thrasher, and Wood Thrush.

Superimposed on this basic meeting of north and south is the variety of other habitats resulting from the Park's rugged topography and the impact of modern man. Even a short trip will take us by maple forest, spruce bogs, road edges, beaver ponds, campgrounds, lakes, and cliffs, and each provides different opportunities that are exploited by different birds.

This book will introduce you to the main habitats of Algonquin and to the most striking birds — 77 in all — that you can expect to find in each. We hope, through colour photographs and short accounts, to present the beauty and interest of these representative park species and to encourage you to discover and enjoy them on your own. Although the photographs will help you identify many Algonquin birds, this book is not intended to be a field identification guide. For that purpose you should purchase one or more of the excellent titles listed on the back page and available in the bookstores at either the Park Museum or Logging Museum.

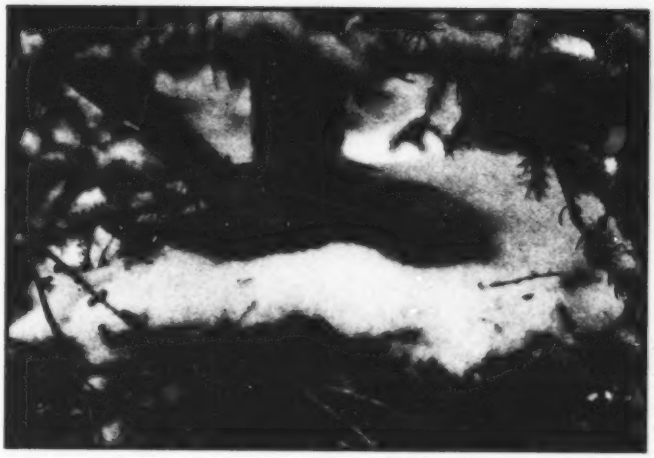
Readers wishing detailed information (status, arrival dates, etc.) on all the bird species recorded in Algonquin are referred to the Park's Technical Bulletin No. 9, *Checklist and Seasonal Status of the Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park*, also available at the Park bookstores.

Birds of the Spruce Bogs

Here and there, dotted over the Algonquin landscape are hundreds of spruce bogs. These are examples of a distinctly northern habitat, not commonly found much south of Algonquin, and which harbour a special set of northern birds.

Spruce bogs in Algonquin form in small, quiet lakes or sheltered bays of larger ones when special sedges and mosses adapted to high acidity and low oxygen levels grow out from shore and form a floating mat of vegetation. In time, the mat may completely cover what was once open water and generations of mosses and shrubs may live and die, sinking down to form layers of peat. At first the layer supports only low shrubs, but as it becomes more substantial, scattered Tamarack and Black Spruce take root and, given enough time, eventually a dense forest of spruce will grow in place of the original pond.

Algonquin spruce bogs then present a succession of very different situations for birds — the initial open shrub mat, the succeeding stage of scattered small trees, and the final closed-in, mature Black Spruce forest. Here is a selection of birds typically associated with the various stages undergone by an Algonquin spruce bog. Excellent places to see these and other spruce bog birds include the Mizzy Lake Trail and the Spruce Bog Boardwalk.



Dan Strickland

Gray Jay

Perisoreus canadensis

Geai du Canada

The Gray Jay is a characteristic bird of the Black Spruce forests of Algonquin bogs. It is a true northerner, seldom found much south of the Park but common from here all the way up to the tree line. Unlike the vast majority of northern birds, the Gray Jay is a permanent resident, performing the seemingly impossible task of surviving the long season of cold and snow when there is no obvious food supply. The Gray Jay manages this trick by storing insects, berries, and pieces of meat or mushrooms all over its territory during summer and fall. It is these thousands of hidden food stores, tucked away up in the trees behind flakes of bark or tufts of lichen, that comfortably sustain Gray Jays through the winter.

Food storage is so central to the survival of Gray Jays that it affects almost every aspect of their lives. For example, they have special, enlarged salivary glands so that they can cover the food they hide with a sticky coating and fasten it more securely in their hiding places. They even nest in March when the snow is still deep so that the young will fledge that much earlier and have a head start on amassing the food stores they will need to get through their first winter.

Most of all, Gray Jays are extraordinarily quick to learn about any possible new source of storable food, and this accounts for their famous "friendliness" to human beings. You can't travel very long in Algonquin Park, at least during the cold season, without being found by a pair of Gray Jays who obviously expect a hand-out. If you do share your meal with the jays — and who can resist — you will see that they hardly eat any of it. Instead, they make trip after trip back into the forest, carefully concealing each tidbit, and in effect transforming what was once your lunch into extra survival insurance for themselves.

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher

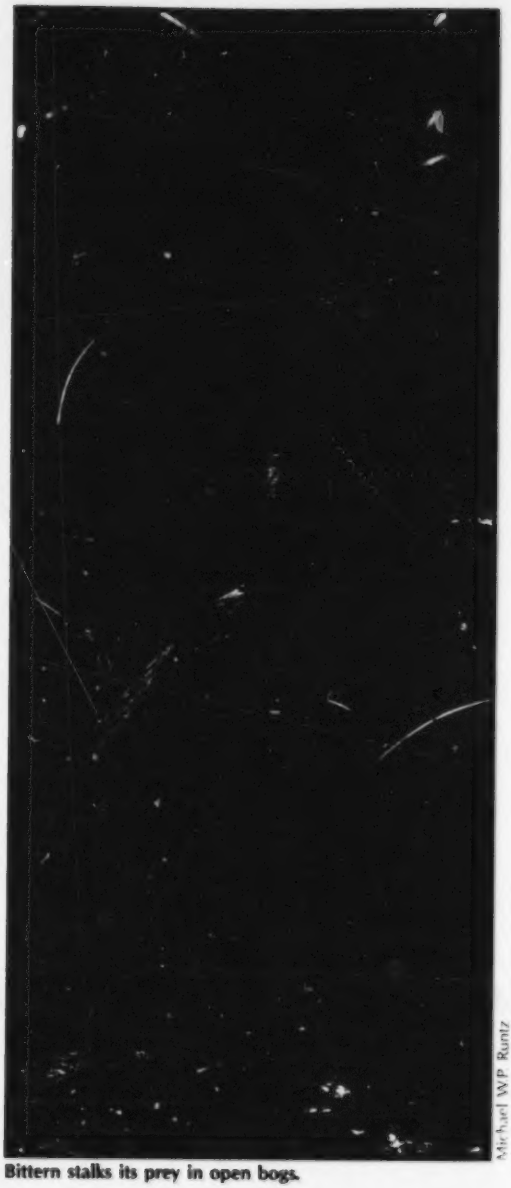
Empidonax flaviventris

Moucherolle à ventre jaune

The Yellow-bellied Flycatcher may not be a very spectacular bird, but it is an excellent sample of how one basic bird may split up into two or more species, each specialized for one particular habitat. This bird belongs to a genus, or group, of very similar flycatchers often referred to by its scientific name *Empidonax*. The Yellow-bellied Flycatcher is the member of the genus that lives in spruce bogs, but if you turn to page 18 you will see another member of the genus, the Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minutus*), that looks almost the same but lives in the completely different environment of our hardwood forests. The Park has even a third *Empidonax*, the Alder Flycatcher, that lives in yet another habitat, the alder swales so common along slow-moving Algonquin rivers. Members of this particular genus look so similar to each other that their identification can be a real challenge. About the only break a confused birdwatcher gets is that their songs and call notes are completely different. These and the bird's habitat should help you sort out any *Empidonax* you see here in the breeding season.

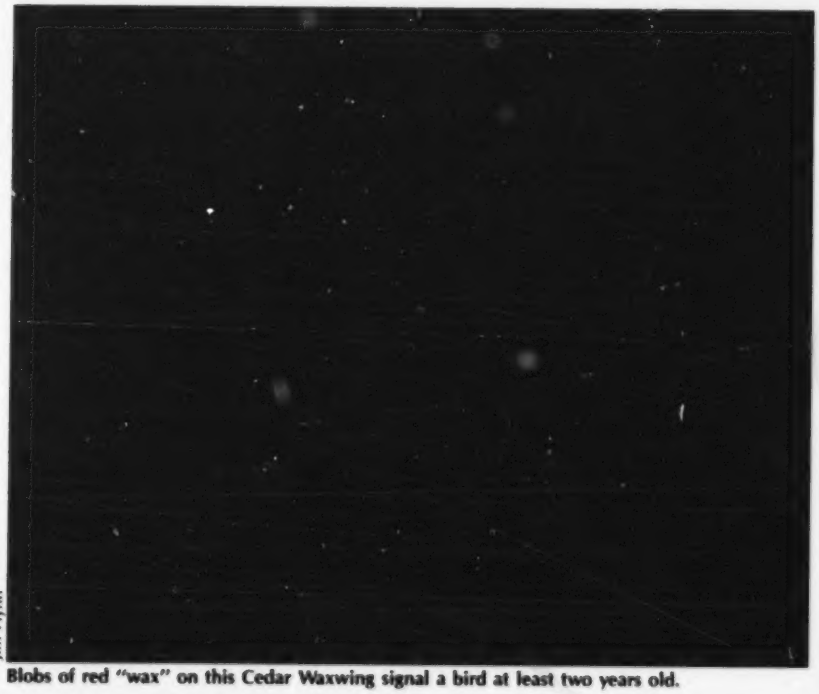
Michael W.P. Runtz

Spruce Grouse, exotic-looking but hard to find!



Michael W.P. Runtz

Bittern stalks its prey in open bogs.

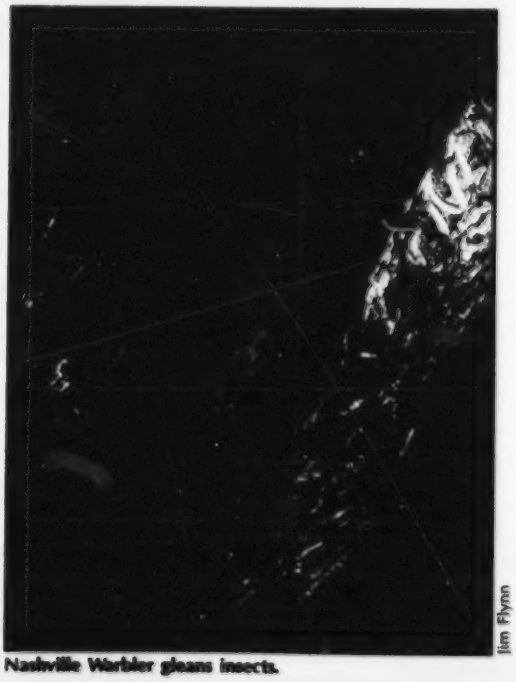


Jim Flynn

Blobs of red "wax" on this Cedar Waxwing signal a bird at least two years old.

James M. Richards

Olive-sided Flycatcher sings "Quick, three beers!"



Jim Flynn

Nashville Warbler gleans insects.

Spruce Grouse

Dendragapus canadensis

Tétras du Canada

Many people interested in birds make special trips to Algonquin just to see a Spruce Grouse. This is another true northerner, rarely found south of the Park and, even here, almost always restricted to the mature Black Spruce forests of our larger bogs (or Jack Pine stands on the east side). Although it is reasonably common in such habitats, the Spruce Grouse can still be exasperatingly difficult to find. It is often absurdly tame, meaning you can walk right by without noticing, and if it is quietly feeding on foliage up in a thick spruce it can be very difficult to spot indeed.

The one time of the year when it is truly conspicuous is the April mating season. Then the males engage in spectacular "flutter flights" in which they noisily fly from the snow up to a branch or vice versa and then strut magnificently. A performing male, with engorged red "eyebrows", beautiful, contrasting plumage, and fan tail opening and closing with audible "swishes", is equal to the most exotic wildlife to be found anywhere.

Cedar Waxwing

Bombycilla cedrorum

Jaseur des cèdres

Cedar Waxwings are common summer inhabitants of wet areas of Algonquin, particularly spruce bogs. They are well worth a look, not only for their outstanding beauty but also because of two things that are unusual about them.

One is the presence, at the ends of the inner wing feathers of many individual birds, of blobs of what looks for all the world like bright red sealing wax. For many years the function of this "wax" was a mystery, but we now know, thanks to a study carried out by a former Algonquin summer naturalist, that the red blobs are possessed by waxwings that are at least two years old. Waxwings apparently use the feature to recognize (and be recognized as) older, more experienced, and therefore better, potential mates.

Waxwings are also unusual among Algonquin birds in that they nest very late in the season — July, or even August. The reason for this is quite simple. Waxwings are berry-eaters, and by delaying their nesting season they raise their young at the time of year when the berry supply is at a peak. If waxwings were mainly insect-eaters, like most of our other song birds, they would no doubt time their nesting so that the nestlings could be fed on the year's greatest insect population — in June or early July.

Olive-sided Flycatcher

Contopus borealis

Moucherolle à côtés olive

Just about every visitor to Algonquin, and certainly every canoeist, has heard the rousing and yet strangely sad, whistled call "Quick, three beers!" come drifting across a boggy bay or from the tip of a tall, dead spire high overhead. It is a beautiful, lonely call that, for many people, is every bit as characteristic of the Park's wild and secret places as the gaunt Black Spruce gently swaying in the breezes of early summer.

The source of the call, the Olive-sided Flycatcher, is not well known, nor could you even consider it striking in appearance. (It isn't just the sides that are dull olive — the same goes for the head, the wings, the back, and the tail.) Nevertheless, we would venture to say, especially in mosquito season, that any bird called a "flycatcher" just has to be of more than passing interest. We need all the help we can get!

Trusting in flycatchers for deliverance from the insect hordes is at least partly justified. For example, if you watch an Olive-sided Flycatcher for awhile you will soon realize that it routinely spots, at distances of 70 metres or more, insects that you can't see at all. Within seconds the flycatcher has zoomed out to its prey, snapped it up, and flown back to a suitable perch.

Even on the rare occasions when the insect sees the Olive-sided coming and takes evasive action, the result is the same. When it has to, the flycatcher is capable of seemingly effortless, but nonetheless lightning-fast, manoeuvers that are more than a match for any insect. In fact, when you get right down to it, the Olive-sided (and flycatchers generally) are incomparably more efficient and deadly predators than say, wolves or eagles, both of which more often than not fail to capture their intended prey.

American Bittern

Botaurus lentiginosus

Butor d'Amérique

The bittern is probably a fairly common inhabitant of the Park's larger expanses of treeless bog, but it's hard to be sure. Unlike other members of the heron family, this bird has behaviour and colouration that make it very hard to see. Instead of waiting or wading in shallow water out in plain sight, the Bittern carefully stalks through dense bog or marsh vegetation and seldom provides us with the opportunity for a clear view. Even when we are almost on top of a bittern it is far from certain that we will actually get to see it. Rather than jump into the air and betray its presence, a bittern usually stands perfectly still with its long neck and bill pointed straight up. In this way, the general lines of its body and the vertical brown and light stripes on its neck blend in so well with the surrounding vegetation that we often fail to realize that two yellow eyes are watching us very carefully.

Of course, if we humans find it hard to see a bittern, we may assume that bitterns themselves will have trouble as well. This might not matter too much for most of the year but, at least for the purposes of mating, bitterns do, on occasion, need to get around their mutual invisibility. That is why, almost alone among herons, the male American Bittern has a distinct, self-advertising vocalization by which he proclaims his presence and location to any nearby females.

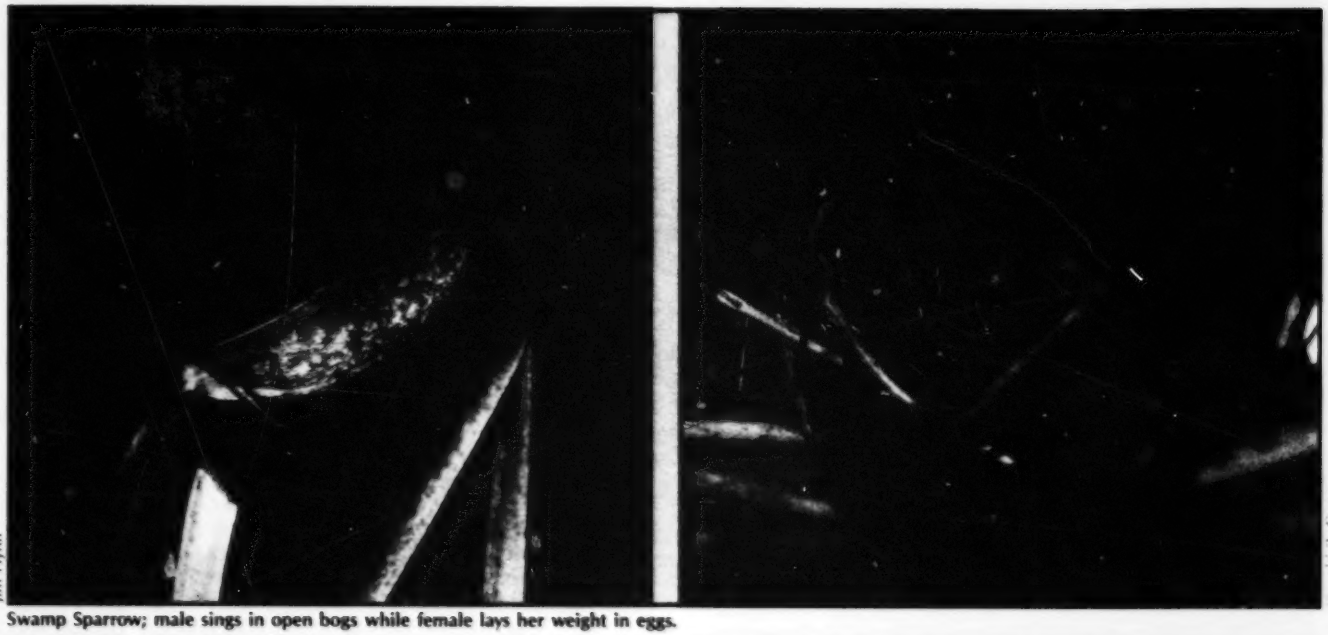
You may be forgiven, however, if you fail to recognize the call (oonk-a-goonk) as coming from a bittern or even a bird. Some people compare it to the sound of an old-fashioned, hand-powered water pump or to that of a stake being driven into wet ground. When you learn what makes the sound or, better still, if you can see the bird going through the incredible gyrations of head and neck that are required to produce it, you will enjoy that much more the beauty and wildness of an Algonquin spruce bog on a summer evening.

Nashville Warbler

Vermivora ruficapilla

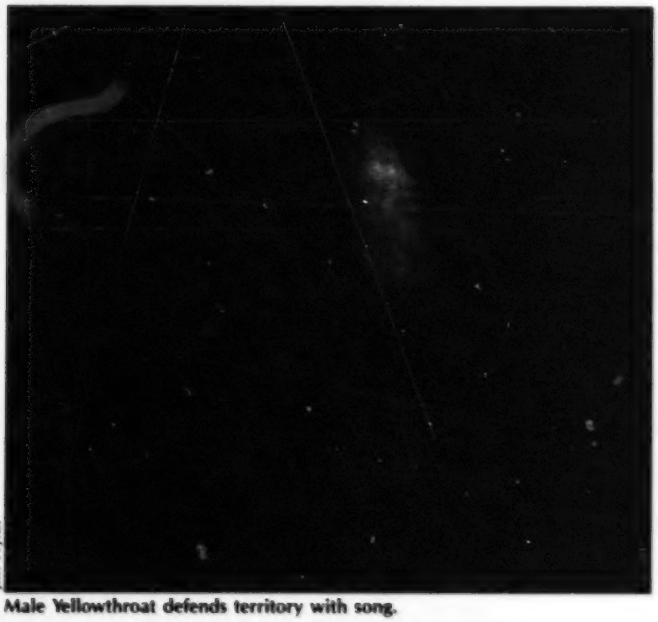
Paruline à joues grises

Twenty species of warblers nest in Algonquin Park. All are small, usually brightly coloured insect-eaters and, since they have the same basic life style, the question may be asked as to how they can all coexist. Why haven't just a few, or even one, come to predominate? The answer is that each species specializes in one or two distinct habitats. While it may not be immediately obvious to us, different warblers have subtly different hunting techniques, bill shapes and sizes, and even leg musculatures, and these make each species more efficient in one habitat or another. We have already seen, for example, that in the early, shrub stage of spruce bog development, it is the Common Yellowthroat that has the insect-eating "franchise". Farther back, where small trees start to take over the bog, there is an obviously different physical environment with different insects. Here, it is this species, the Nashville Warbler, that makes a living by picking insects from the foliage — and to the normal exclusion of all other potentially competing warbler species.



Jim Flynn

Swamp Sparrow; male sings in open bogs while female lays her weight in eggs.



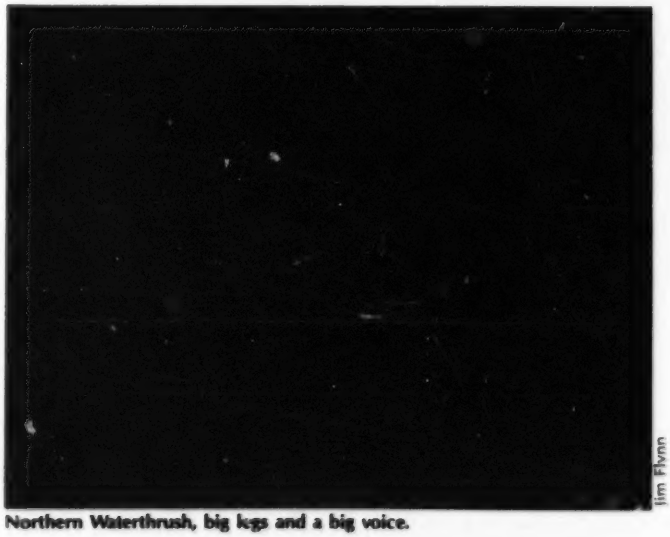
Jim Flynn

Male Yellowthroat defends territory with song.

Boreal Chickadee is a true northerner.

Jim Flynn

Over half of all Ruby-crowned Kinglets die each year.



Jim Flynn

Northern Waterthrush, big legs and a big voice.

Swamp Sparrow

Melospiza georgiana

Bruant des marais

The Swamp Sparrow is not a very striking bird visually, but its loud musical trills are a pleasing and commonly heard spring and summer sound of Algonquin's open spruce bogs. The bird itself is hard to see since it likes to keep under cover in the shrub layer. There, it exploits the seed supply provided by the bog vegetation, as well as cropping some of the insects.

Female Swamp Sparrows typically lay a clutch of four or five eggs at the rate of one egg every day. The fact that the combined weight of the eggs may approach the female's own weight gives some idea of the extraordinary investment birds devote to reproducing themselves each year. Like all organisms, Swamp Sparrows produce as many healthy young as they possibly can. There may once have been individual birds that opted for "taking things easy" and producing fewer young than they could but, by definition, they left fewer descendants than their harder working neighbours. With each generation the fraction of "lazy" individuals in the Swamp Sparrow population became smaller and smaller, and today the only kind we have left are the ones that do their utmost to contribute to the next generation.

Common Yellowthroat

Geothlypis trichas

Paruline masquée

Although there are no trees out in the open parts of an Algonquin bog, there is a dense layer of Leatherleaf and other shrubs, and this vegetation supports many kinds of insects. There is thus an opportunity for a small bird capable of efficiently moving about in the thick shrubs and capitalizing on the otherwise untapped supply of protein.

This opportunity, or "niche" as biologists like to call it, is filled by a member of the warbler family, the Common Yellowthroat. Most warblers live in forests, but this one is most at home in the low wet vegetation of bogs and marshes, and its loud ringing song, "witchety, witchety, witchety, witch," is a characteristic sound of Park bogs in spring and early summer.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Regulus calendula

Roitelet à couronne rubis

Next to the hummingbird, the Ruby-crowned Kinglet is the smallest bird that occurs in Algonquin. But if the body is little the voice is big, and the lively, rollicking song of Ruby-crowns is one of the most characteristic melodies of our summer spruce bogs, often overshadowing that of much larger birds.

Like many small birds whose insect food supply is abundant in summer but unavailable in winter, the Ruby-crowned Kinglet must migrate to warmer climates each winter. These journeys to unfamiliar haunts and its small size combine to make the kinglet very vulnerable to bad weather, predators, and low food supplies. The result is that over half of all Ruby-crowned Kinglets die each year. Those that do make it back to Algonquin find food so plentiful that they are commonly able to raise eight or nine youngsters. The nest is a rather large sphere made of mosses, lichens, and bark strips, with a small opening in the top, and is usually well hidden in a conifer.

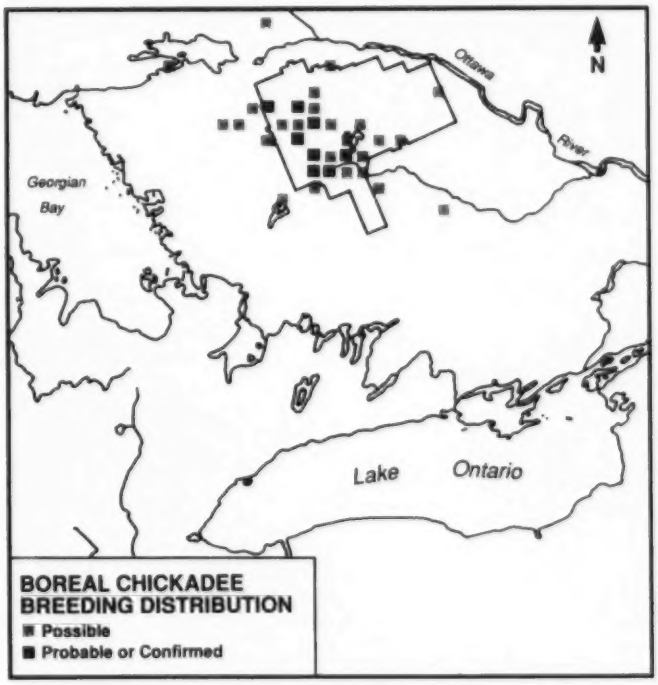
Boreal Chickadee

Parus hudsonicus

Mésange à tête brune

Everybody with a bird feeder knows the Black-capped Chickadee, but many people are unaware there is a brown-capped species as well. You pretty well have to come at least as far north as Algonquin to see it, however, because the Boreal Chickadee rarely ventures south of here. Specifically, it is a bird of the mature Black Spruce forests of our larger bogs, where it creeps through the thick foliage, almost in a mouse-like manner at times, and would usually go unnoticed except for its voice. (Listen for a chickadee call but one that is much more nasal and "peevish-sounding" than that of the Black-capped Chickadees you know from back home.)

Even here in the Park the Boreal Chickadee is mostly confined to the highest part of the west side highlands where the climate is just a little more severe and the forests just a little more northern than in the country surrounding the Park. This distribution was clearly shown by the map produced for the Boreal Chickadee by the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, a volunteer project involving over 1300 people in the province from 1981 to 1985. Several other northern Ontario birds show the same patttern of being present as breeders in the Algonquin highlands but absent in the lower, less boreal forests all around the Park.



Nancy Checko

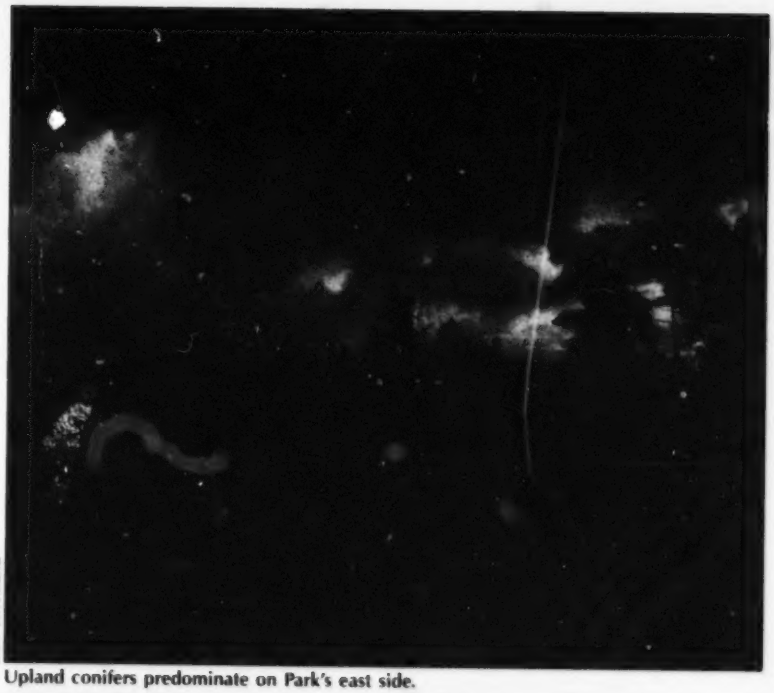
Northern Waterthrush

Seiurus noveboracensis

Paruline des ruisseaux

Notwithstanding its English name, this bird is another warbler. There is no denying that it looks different from most members of its family, however, and it certainly has a different way of life. The waterthrush forages in wet bogs and swampy areas, particularly ones that have standing pools of water. It uses its big legs to kick over dead leaves in search of insects and even to wade in shallow water.

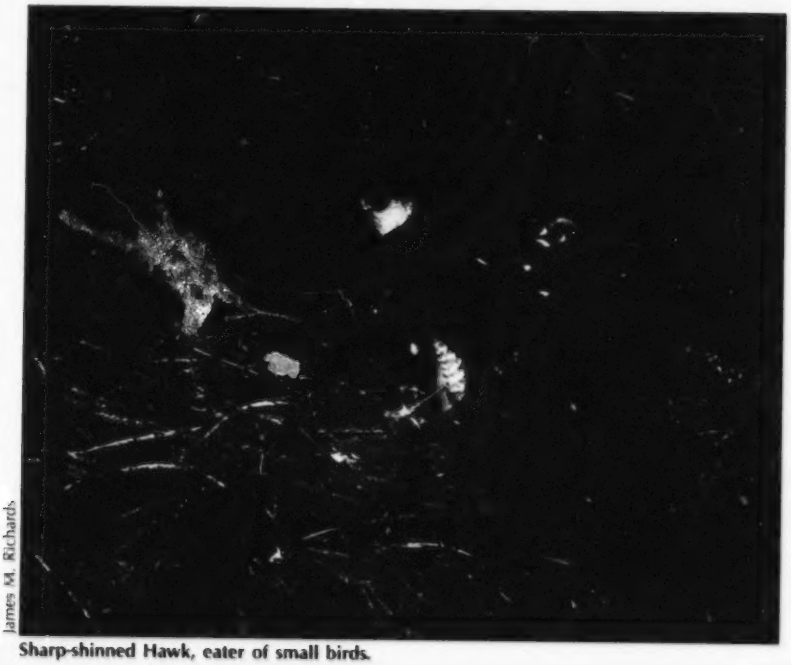
We seldom get to see any of this, unfortunately, because waterthrushes like to keep out of sight and they live in a habitat difficult for us humans to penetrate. Their song, however, is louder and carries farther than that of almost any Algonquin bird. Once you know what says "Twit, twit, twit, chew, chew, chew" you will realize just how many waterthrushes are out there!



Dan Strickland

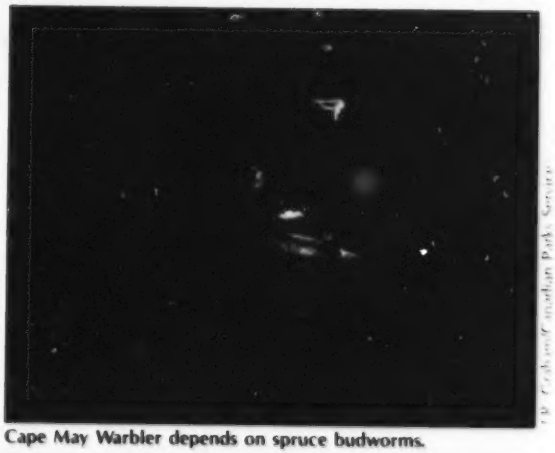
Upland conifers predominate on Park's east side.

Solitary Vireo lives in conifers.



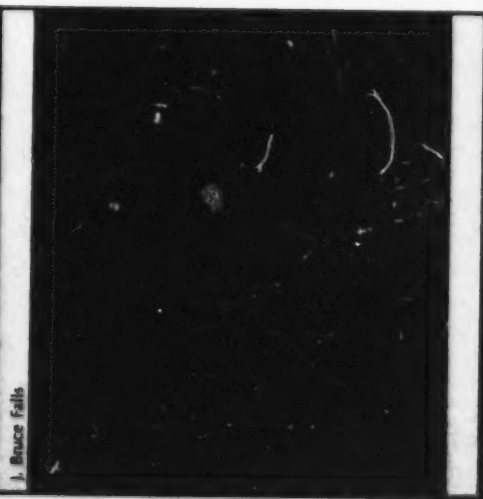
James M. Richards

Sharp-shinned Hawk, eater of small birds.

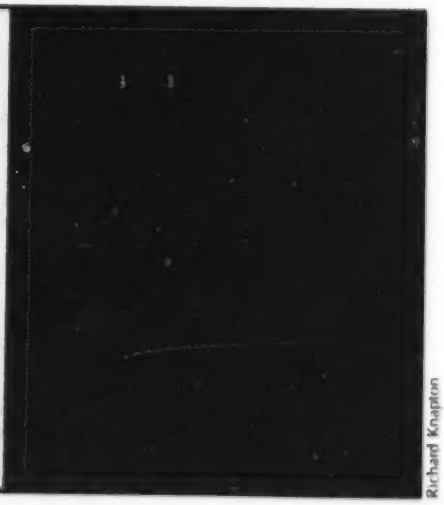


Cape May Warbler depends on spruce budworms.

Richard Knapton



J. Bruce Falls



Richard Knapton

Famous songster, White-throated Sparrow, comes in two colour varieties as shown by these two males.

Birds of the Coniferous Forests

Visitors coming to Algonquin from the south are impressed by the prominent coniferous component in the Park forests. Actually there are many different kinds of coniferous forest in Algonquin, including Eastern Hemlock groves, which in this book we have treated as part of the Park's hardwood forests because that is where they occur. There are also lowland forests of Black Spruce, which we consider to be distinctive enough habitat (the final stage in the process of spruce bog formation) to be discussed under that separate heading.

The remaining coniferous forests, whose birds we introduce here, include the lakeshore fringes of White Cedar, Balsam Fir, Eastern Hemlock, and White Spruce, and the forests that grow on dry sandy areas, particularly on Algonquin's east side, but also in west side pockets like the Two Rivers-Pog area. These upland, coniferous areas contain White and Red Pine, Balsam Fir, White Spruce, and various admixtures of Trembling Aspen and White Birch.

Unlike mature hardwoods, these trees tend not to form broad, umbrella-like crowns, and so much more light is admitted to the lower levels of our coniferous forests. This results in a much greater variety of tree and shrub layers that can support insects and, therefore, birds that can exploit different sub-habitats of the forest.

This richness is especially pronounced in the warblers, and Algonquin's coniferous forests boast an impressive array. To give a small sample, one species specializes in White Pine forests, another makes its living in young Balsam Fir trees, a third likes the crowns of mature White Spruce, especially during outbreaks of the Spruce Budworm, and yet another is the dominant insect-consumer of our lakeside conifer fringes. The forest floor is the domain of thrushes, but ground conditions in coniferous forests (pine and spruce needles) are so different from those in hardwood forests (matted dead maple leaves) that coniferous forests have their own species (Hermit and Swainson's Thrushes) distinct from those living in the hardwoods.

The most notable vegetable food available in our coniferous forests is the seeds produced by the trees themselves. There are, in fact, two extraordinary birds, the Red Crossbill and the White-winged Crossbill, that can extract the seeds from spruce and pine cones — but we have chosen to discuss them under the heading of "Winter" because that is the season when they are often the most prominent in Algonquin Park.

Sharp-shinned Hawk

Accipiter striatus

Épervier brun

This book is largely about the various types of food available to birds in the diverse habitats of Algonquin Park and how each is exploited by different species of birds. But the numerous individuals of all those different birds themselves constitute a potential food supply as well. All that is needed for yet another kind of bird to take advantage of that supply is the ability to catch up with birds, subdue them, and rip them apart into bite-sized pieces.

In fact, there is such a bird-eating bird, and it is called the Sharp-shinned Hawk. It hunts by a combination of stealth, surprise, and speed — anything that will allow it to dash in and with razor-sharp talons seize a victim before it can react. Because the supply of small birds is greater in coniferous forests, Sharp-shins live and nest there as well. Females are much larger than males and usually take larger prey as well. This size difference allows a pair of Sharp-shins to exploit a much wider range of prey species than they could if they were both the same size. This can be of critical importance in the difficult task of catching enough food to supply themselves and a nestful of young.

Most Sharp-shinned Hawks leave for the south when their prey does, and if you do any canoe-tripping in early September you stand a good chance of seeing numerous individuals flap-gliding their way southwards across our larger lakes.

Solitary Vireo

Vireo solitarius

Viréo à tête bleue

Vireos are small insect-eating birds of the treetops. They are something like warblers in appearance and life style but are a bit bigger and slower and more deliberate in their movements.

The Solitary Vireo is the species we find in coniferous forests, corresponding to the common Red-eyed Vireo of the hardwoods. Both species build beautiful, cup-shaped nests suspended by their rim beneath a forked branch and blending into the scenery like their owners. The songs of the two birds are also quite alike, but that is about as far as the similarities go. Male Solitary Vireos (unlike male Red-eyes) help their mates to build the nest and incubate the eggs. Perhaps because they are so busy or perhaps because they cannot risk betraying the location of the nest, male Solitaries sing very little after the eggs are laid. If you hear a Solitary Vireo singing in June, the chances are that it is an unattached male still hoping to attract a female.

Cape May Warbler

Dendroica tigrina

Paruline tigrée

This warbler is named for where it was first collected, at the southern tip of New Jersey, but it is really a bird of northern coniferous forests. Specifically, it likes the crowns of tall, sun-bathed White Spruce trees. Even then, it needs something else to really prosper. Cape May Warblers are quite scarce most of the time, but when there is an outbreak of spruce budworm caterpillars, these birds really come into their own. They seem to be everywhere, and they may even bring off two broods in a season — so plentiful is the food available for nestlings. Nevertheless, after the three or four years of the outbreak, the warblers dwindle back down to their normal very low population levels. There is even a question whether we would have this beautiful bird at all if there were no spruce budworm outbreaks from time to time.

White-throated Sparrow

Zonotrichia albicollis

Bruant à gorge blanche

In Algonquin Park there is no question that the White-throated Sparrow is the outstanding member of the finch family. It is abundant in our coniferous forests, and in the first half of summer it is virtually impossible to find a place in that habitat where the clear whistles of its "Sweet, Canada, Canada, Canada" song cannot be heard. The untrained human listener commonly has difficulty separating one bird song from another, but there is something about this one that attracts attention. As one early ornithologist put it, "The White-throated Sparrow is one of the sweetest singers, and for its full effect it should be heard on its northern breeding grounds at evening. When all else is silent save the occasional melancholy notes of the Whip-poor-will or the distant hoot of some owl, the effect produced by this incomparable song is surpassingly beautiful".

Actually seeing a White-throat calls for a bit of perseverance and luck, but if you succeed there is something to watch for. The head stripes may be clearly black and white or they may be chocolate and tan. This is not a male-female difference because, in fact, either sex can occur as a "white-striped" or "tan-striped" bird. What's more, white-striped males tend to pair with tan-striped females and tan-striped males with white-striped females.

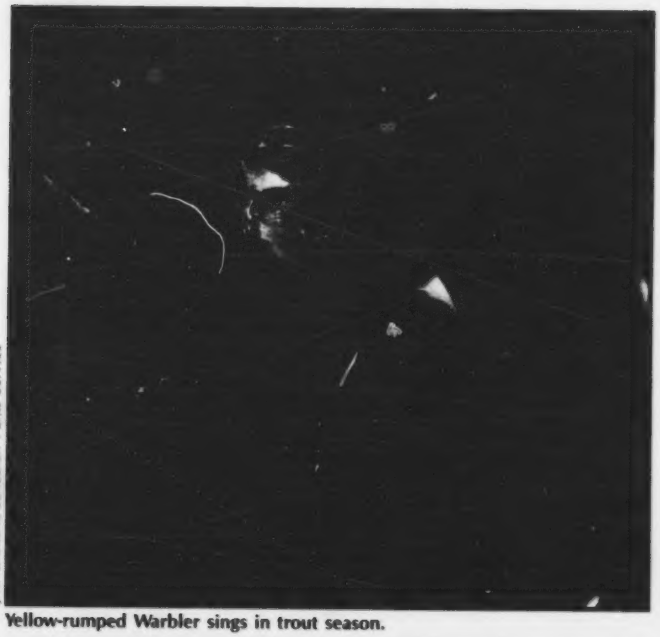
No-one knows for sure what all this means, but there is a suggestion that white-striped birds are more aggressive defenders of their territory, and tan-striped birds are better provisioners of the nest. Maybe it takes both types to make for successful reproduction.

Jim Flynn

Red-breasted Nuthatch surrounds nest cavity with pitch.

James M. Richards

Saw-whet Owl toots like a time signal.

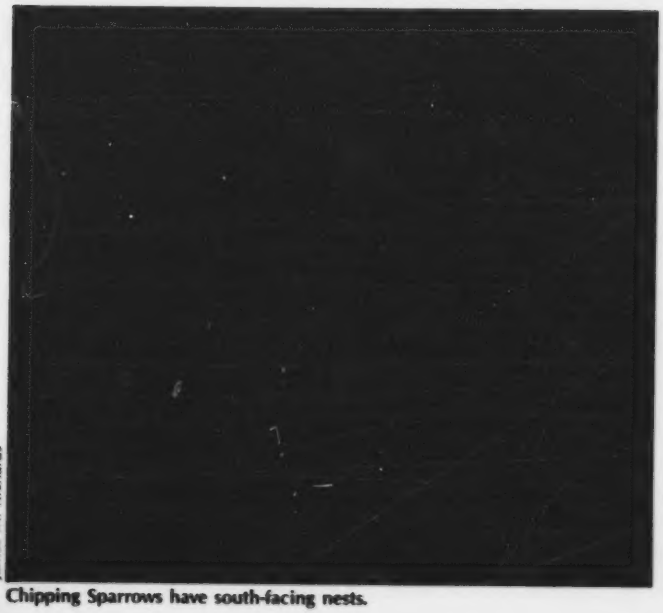


J.R. Graham/Canadian Parks Service

Yellow-rumped Warbler sings in trout season.

James M. Richards

Swainson's Thrush, obscure but sings like an angel.



James M. Richards

Chipping Sparrows have south-facing nests.

Jim Flynn

Pine Warbler, common in east-side pine forests.

Red-breasted Nuthatch

Sitta canadensis

Sittelle à poitrine rousse

Nuthatches look for insects and insect eggs on the bark of trees. They are quite at ease in any position, so it is not at all unusual to see one descending a tree trunk head-first.

We have two kinds in Algonquin, the Red-breasted Nuthatch of coniferous forests, shown here, and the larger White-breasted Nuthatch of our hardwood forests. Both kinds build their nests in tree cavities rather than out in the open the way most birds do. This type of nest placement gives protection from bad weather, greatly decreases the chance of an accidental fall from the nest, and, most important of all, means that predators are far less likely to discover and eat the eggs or young nestlings. These advantages are enjoyed by all hole-nesting birds, but the nuthatches have added a further refinement. The White-breasted Nuthatch smears the entrance to its nest hole with crushed insects, and the Red-breasted does the same thing with sticky pitch. It is believed that this discourages would-be robbers or (in the case of pitch) actually traps them. The Red-breasted Nuthatch is very adept at flying directly into its nest hole without touching the sides, but there is at least one case on record of an adult bird getting caught in its own pitch and dying as a result.

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Dendroica coronata

Paruline à croupion jaune

Wood warblers are known only from the New World. Their greatest concentration is in the northeastern part of the continent, in the mixed forest where southern hardwoods begin to give way to northern coniferous trees. This places Algonquin Park in prime warbler country. But while they have more colourful plumages than any other large family of Canadian birds and occupy every corner of the Park, warblers are little known to the general public.

If this describes your situation and you want to turn things around, the Yellow-rumped Warbler is the logical species to start with. It is one of the very first to return in spring — in late April, well before leaf-out — and its pleasant trills are familiar, at least unconsciously, to all spring trout fishermen. It is a bird of mixed evergreen forests, including the coniferous fringes of Algonquin lakes. By June its song has noticeably dropped off, and it remains rather inconspicuous through the summer. Nevertheless, by fall it has once again become the common Park warbler. Bands of these drab, brownish, tall-plumaged (but still with bright yellow rumps!) birds are common in our September woods.

Chipping Sparrow

Spizella passerina

Bruant familier

The Chipping Sparrow is a bird you may well be familiar with from towns and gardens back home. In Algonquin Park it is a bird we associate with open coniferous stands and never with the closed hardwood forests of the Park's west side. The reason for this is simply that the Chipping Sparrow is a grass seed specialist, and for grass to grow a certain amount of sunlight is required. The open structure of many coniferous forests allows enough sunlight to reach the forest floor and permits the growth of grass. This rarely occurs in shady hardwood stands, however, and probably accounts for the exclusion of Chipping Sparrows from the latter habitat.

Chipping Sparrows used to be famous for using horse hair to line their nests, but in Algonquin they use moose and deer hair! Another feature, discovered here in the Park and also helping to keep the nestlings warm, is the placement of the nests on the southeast side of small spruce trees. That way the nests catch the morning sun and recover more quickly from cool nights.

Northern Saw-whet Owl

Aegolius acadicus

Petite Nyctale

All birds must find food in order to survive. Usually the most successful approach is specializing in one general type of food, and owls are no exception. They are flesh-eaters that specialize even further by preying mostly on mice. This would seem to be a promising food source because mice are often abundant and they don't see very far, permitting predators to approach unnoticed.

The tiny Saw-whet Owl (only 20 cm tall) is the common owl of the Park's coniferous forests, but what makes small size so advantageous in such e vironments is not known. Larger owls can capture mice even in deep snow, but Saw-whets can't do this reliably and most are obliged to migrate south before they get into trouble. A few do overwinter here, and we speculate that they may survive by preying on roosting birds.

Even the migrants are back long before the snow is all gone, however, and the singing of Saw-whet Owls is a common sound of Algonquin nights in April and May. Listen for a short, musical whistle repeated every half second for minutes at a time. It sounds for all the world like a never-ending time signal or the sound made when a saw is being sharpened — hence the name.

Swainson's Thrush

Catharus ustulatus

Grive à dos olive

Our most famous thrush, the Robin, has the distinction of being equally common in the towns and cities of southern Ontario and the campgrounds of Algonquin Park. Here, however, it shares its forested environment with several other members of the family. These less well-known thrushes are all spot-breasted, brown-backed, rather secretive birds of the forest floor. They make a living by rummaging through the leaf litter, looking for insects, or listening for, and pulling out, earthworms. We rarely get to see them, but if we use our ears we can soon learn to distinguish the thrushes and come to the realization that each species has its own preferred habitat.

The Swainson's Thrush, shown here, is the common thrush of our low-lying, dampish coniferous forests. This does not mean it is a stranger to the upper levels of the forest, however. Its favourite song perches are at the very tops of tall spruce trees and, much more than the other thrushes, the Swainson's performs aerial pursuits of flying insects.

Pine Warbler

Dendroica pinus

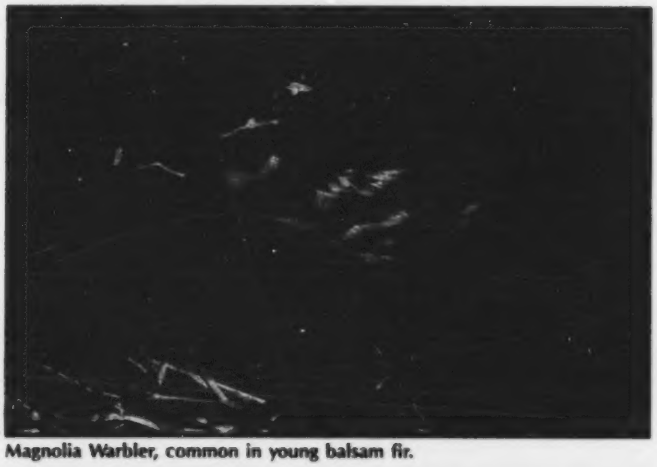
Paruline des pins

This bird's name tells it all. It's a warbler, and it lives in pines. As a matter of fact, it is uncommon on the Park's west side where stands of big pine are scarce but, on the east side, it is one of the most numerous warblers. The extensive stands of large White Pine growing on the east side outwash sand plains left when the last glacier melted are just what this bird needs.

You'll need a bit of practice to recognize its song, however. It sings loudly, and often, in an attractive musical trill, but this closely resembles one of the songs of the Chipping Sparrow — also found commonly in the same habitat. Then, too, the songs of these two species are only a small part of the sometimes overwhelming May-June bird chorus of Algonquin Park. We tend to take for granted that birds sing and nest in spring and early summer, but this is really only a "local" phenomenon. What they actually do is time their breeding season so as to coincide with the time of year when food is sufficiently plentiful for the feeding of nestlings. This happens to be in May and June in our part of the world, but in other places it is sometimes November-December — or even all year round.

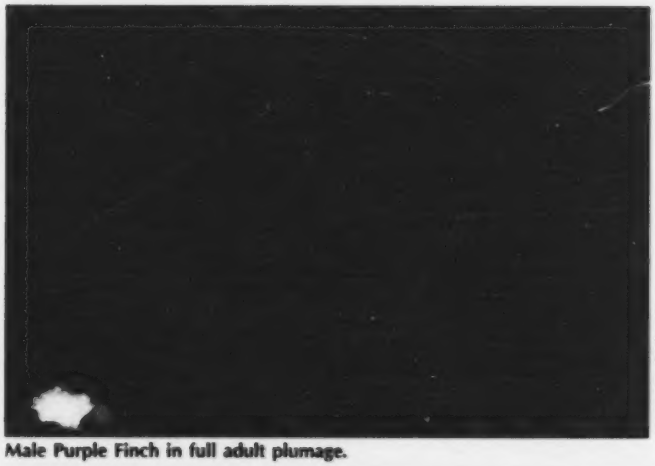
James M. Richards

Northern Goshawk, powerful killer of grouse and hares.



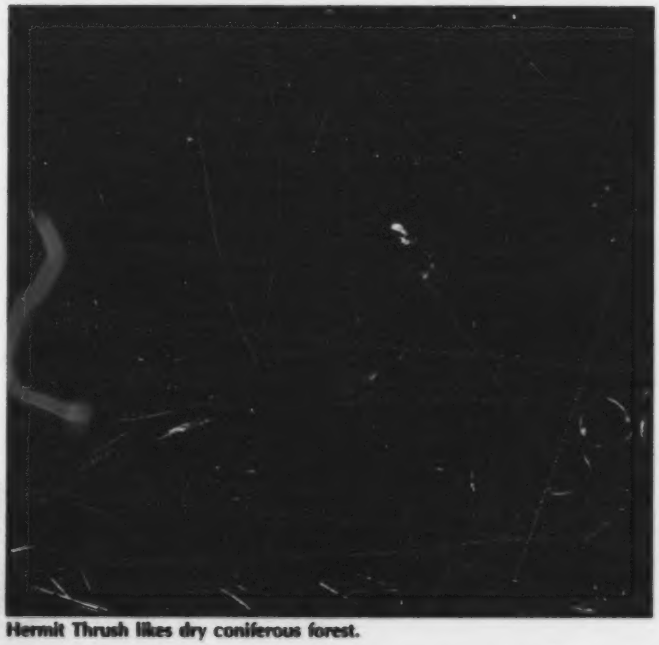
James M. Richards

Magnolia Warbler, common in young balsam fir.



James M. Richards

Male Purple Finch in full adult plumage.



James M. Richards

Hermit Thrush likes dry coniferous forest.

James M. Richards

Black-and-white Warbler hunts food on tree trunks.

Northern Goshawk

Accipiter gentilis

Autour des palombes

The Goshawk is a much larger version of the Sharp-shinned Hawk. It has the same general shape (short rounded wings and long tail for maximum manoeuvrability) and the same general hunting technique (concealment and/or stealthy approach followed by a rapid dash after the prey). Being larger, however, the Goshawk does not bother with the small birds taken by Sharp-shins but goes after much heftier animals like Snowshoe Hares and Ruffed Grouse.

As you might imagine, such a powerful predator is also a fearless one and that applies especially to the defence of its nest. Humans are regarded as threats to nestlings, and anyone approaching to within 100 metres of an active nest can expect to be dive-bombed or even struck by one or both adults zooming through the trees at you, screaming "kek, kek, kek, kek, kek." Such an experience can be a little hair raising, and it helps to reinforce the popular notion that smaller animals are at the mercy of such fierce predators.

In fact, it is more accurate to say that predators are at the mercy of their prey. When hare and grouse numbers decline, for example — and they do so with great regularity — Goshawks are forced to fly south in a desperate attempt to find food. They may not succeed, but it's better than staying in the Park and facing almost certain starvation.

Magnolia Warbler

Dendroica magnolia

Paruline à tête cendrée

Although it is one of our most attractive birds and a favourite among those people who know it, the Magnolia Warbler is still not noticed by many people. It is a common nester in stands of small Balsam Fir, so it lives close to the ground where we humans are, but the bird is just too small to attract much attention — in spite of its bright colours.

Its songs also, while pretty enough, are among those that most people have a little trouble in learning. Part of the trouble is that, like other warblers, the male Magnolia has not one but two basic songs. One serves primarily to attract females, and the other serves notice to other males that trespassers are not welcome. Not surprisingly, the first is used early in the season, and the second is the one most often heard after eggs are laid and incubation has begun.

Hermit Thrush

Catharus guttatus

Grive solitaire

The Hermit Thrush also lives in coniferous forests but prefers higher and drier situations, often with an admixture of pine.

All the thrushes are noted bird musicians, and an early morning or evening on any of the walking trails is likely to produce bird music from this family equal to any in the world. In fact, to our ears, the song of the Hermit Thrush far surpasses that of the more famous European Nightingale.

It is worth remembering, however, that while to us thrush songs are surpassingly beautiful, to the thrushes themselves their songs are very serious business. As with other songbirds, male thrushes use song not only to attract a mate but also to carve out and defend their territories against other individuals of the same species. If any trespassers fail to heed the musical warning, they will be attacked.

Purple Finch

Carpodacus purpureus

Roselin pourpré

For such a strikingly beautiful bird, the Purple Finch is surprisingly little seen and little known. About the only time we are inescapably conscious of their presence is in the May courting season when males pour down their long, beautiful canary-like songs from the still leafless tree tops. Even then it can be surprisingly hard to spot a noisy red bird in plain view when it doesn't move.

Sometimes when you do spot the songster, it turns out be a brown-plumaged "female" Purple Finch instead. In fact, what you are seeing in such cases is a young male that has not yet developed the red colouration. The theory behind this delayed acquisition of adult plumage in Purple Finches and some other birds is that it permits young, inexperienced males to pass as females and escape the aggressive attentions of older males. The young males, "disguised" as females as it were, can survey the local situation in safety and then, if there are any unmated females left over, they can reveal their true identity by singing and hope the leftover females will settle for them.

This sounds plausible but, so far, there is no proof that it is true. As a matter of fact, there are several other possible explanations that have been proposed to explain why some young males of some species fail to acquire full adult plumage. One competing theory suggests that the individual birds in question are in relatively poor condition and may simply be unable to garner enough energy to produce a brand new red plumage — as well as do all the other things they have to do to stay alive. Only more research will be able to shed light on these questions and establish which theory (or theories) may be correct.

Purple Finches seem to require evergreens for nesting and are thus tied to the coniferous element of Algonquin.

Black-and-white Warbler

Mniotilta varia

Paruline noire et blanche

It is a common theme through this book that basically similar birds coexist in Algonquin Park by dividing up the environment in one of two ways. Sometimes similar species have almost identical life styles but live in completely different habitats — hardwood forests and spruce bogs, for example.

In other cases, similar birds share the same habitat but specialize in different parts of it. The Black-and-white Warbler is a good example of this second group because it shares its mixed coniferous forest environment with several other warbler species — all of which have the same basic lifestyle of gleaning small insects from tree surfaces. The Black-and-white's particular specialty is that it regularly forages in places the other warblers seldom see — the trunks of trees. Don't be surprised to see one of these attractive little birds going up or headfirst down a tree trunk just like a nuthatch.

John Hickie

Hardwoods dominate Park's west side.

Red-eyed Vireos sing all day in hardwoods.

James M. Richards

A pair of Black-throated Blue Warblers at nest.

Hemlock grove in a hardwood forest.

Birds of the Hardwood Forests

Although many people think of Algonquin as being "up north," the truth is that over half the Park is covered by "southern" forests of broad-leaved hardwood trees like Sugar Maple, Beech, and Yellow Birch. These forests would not be out of place near Toronto or Cleveland and neither would the birds found in them. The Park's hardwood forests have definite structural features and discrete possibilities for food and shelter that are used by a distinctive set of birds. For example, the tree tops of Sugar Maples and other hardwood species tend to meld with each other and form a continuous "canopy" of foliage. In summer, at least, this keeps the forest floor, 25-30 metres below, in almost continuous shade, and this in turn severely restricts the growth of flowers and shrubs. The possibilities for birds to make a living by gleaning insects from leaves and branches are, therefore, pretty well restricted to the high forest canopy, and insect eaters on the forest floor must specialize in an entirely different way of life — poking through and kicking over dead leaves. Between the forest floor and the canopy, insects are mostly just flying through on their way to somewhere else and, at that level, the prevalent insect hunters are flycatchers, birds that sit on perches and sally forth to snap up their meals when they fly by.

Of course, with all those wooden trees standing around, there are many wood and bark-dwelling insects that form another major potential food source for birds. Not surprisingly, the hardwood forests of Algonquin have a graded series of such birds, ranging from tiny creepers and nuthatches that search for their food in bark crevices right up to the powerful Pileated Woodpecker that excavates huge holes in large trees as it goes after carpenter ants deep inside the wood.

Hardwood forests have some limited non-insect food possibilities for birds also, including seeds, buds, and a few berries (exploited by a grouse and two finches) and mice, which are supported by the seeds of the dominant Sugar Maple trees. The mice stay hidden by day, but even under cover of darkness their locations can be pinpointed by the eyes and ears of the Park's common hardwood forest hunter of the night — the Barred Owl.

Algonquin's hardwood forests have one other major area available for exploitation by birds, and this comes in the form of groves of Eastern Hemlock. Although such stands are not often bigger than a hectare or two, they are usually quite pure, and the evergreen, needled hemlocks that comprise them constitute little islands that are very different in appearance from the surrounding hardwoods. As a result, they have their own set of canopy and forest floor insect-eaters completely different from the birds that have apparently similar lifestyles in the surrounding sea of broad-leaved trees.

Black-throated Blue Warbler

Dendroica caerulescens

Paruline bleue à gorge noire

The Black-throated Blue Warbler has a rather cumbersome name that, though descriptive, somehow fails to reflect the elegance of this little warbler. It is a common bird of the Park's hardwoods, specializing in the mid-level of the forest (that is, above the ground but below the canopy), and its buzzy, rising songs are a familiar summer sound in Algonquin.

We often refer to birds that nest here as "our" birds, but in doing so we miss a very important fact. Most of our nesters spend only three or four months here and the rest of the year down on their wintering grounds. The Black-throated Blue Warbler, for example, could fairly be called a bird of Central and South America that happens to make short nesting expeditions up to Canada. Many people are worried that the rapid pace of forest clearing in the tropics may bring about a reduction in "our" nesting forest birds in Canada. Opinions are divided as to whether this has actually started to happen yet, but one thing is certain. We cannot preserve habitat in the form of parks in Canada — even large ones — and then assume that all the plants and wildlife they contain will automatically be protected. The various parts of the world and their wildlife are much too interconnected for that.

Red-eyed Vireo

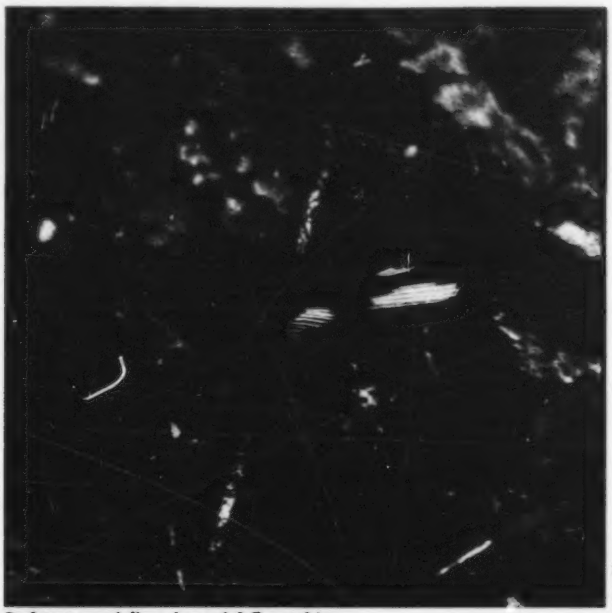
Vireo olivaceus

Viréo aux yeux rouges

According to the eminent ornithologist, Roger Tory Peterson, the Red-eyed Vireo is probably the most abundant bird in eastern North America, and any naturalist will tell you that it almost certainly sings more continuously and for more hours a day than any other bird. Although it "belts out" its short, warbling phrases quite loudly at a rate of close to 3,000 times an hour during the greater part of the day from late May until after mid-summer, it is unlikely that more than a small fraction of Park visitors know of this vireo's existence. The song's monotonous regularity, together with the bird's small size, greenish colour, and habit of spending almost all its time in the leafiest part of the hardwood forest canopy, make this vireo go unnoticed. Bird and voice blend perfectly into the audio-visual landscape, and even the practised birder tends to take the Red-eyed Vireo for granted and has difficulty spotting it if he tries.

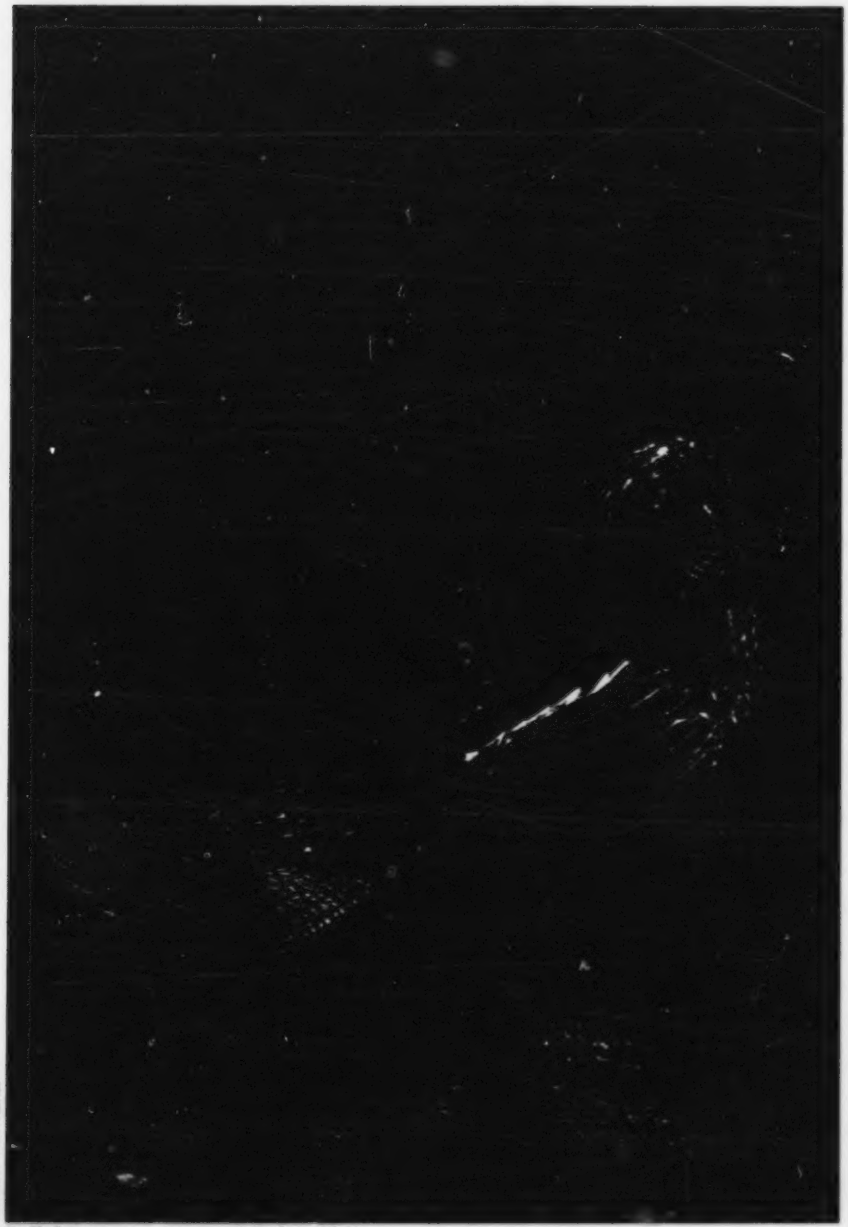
James M. Richards

The Ovenbird is a warbler of forest floor.



Jim Flynn

Redstart specializes in aerial flycatching.



Michael W.P. Kuntz

Ruffed Grouse, a permanent Park resident.

George K. Peck

The Brown Creeper feeds on bark insects and their eggs.

Ovenbird

Seiurus aurocapillus

Paruline couronnée

The Ovenbird is actually a member of the warbler family but one that looks and acts more like a thrush. It spends most of its time walking about on the forest floor where its greenish-brown back and white belly streaked with black make it extremely difficult to see. The song, usually rendered as "teacher, teacher, teacher" (repeated up to 10 times), is loud and easy to learn, however, and so with a bit of practice, you can be detecting a lot of Ovenbirds even if you don't see them very often.

Ovenbirds always nest on the ground and are unusual among Park birds in building a dome-shaped structure with an entrance in the side. (The nest's resemblance to a miniature Dutch oven is the reason for the name "Ovenbird".) The dome roof provides an obvious extra measure of protection for a vulnerable ground nest, but it is far from the only one employed by the Ovenbird.

When a female is flushed from her nest (and this requires a very close approach), she runs away like a mouse before taking flight. She may also use a broken wing act to lead potential predators away from the nest. When the four or five young hatch out, they do not call out like most nestlings, and they are fed infrequent big meals rather than numerous small ones by their parents. Since the adults go to the nest less often, their chances of betraying the nest location are correspondingly reduced.

Even more remarkable is the fact that baby Ovenbirds leave the nest only seven days after hatching (as opposed to 12-14 days in other warblers). This amazing feat is made possible by the rapid growth of the nestlings' legs. True, they can't fly when they leave, but being mobile even on feet is much better for survival than sitting helplessly in a ground nest, which would be found by some predator sooner or later. The chances of at least some young surviving are further increased by each of the adults taking part of the brood and going their separate ways.

Ruffed Grouse

Bonasa umbellus

Gélinotte huppée

We have two species of grouse in Algonquin. The Spruce Grouse is a true northerner that lives in spruce bogs and is not found much south of the Park. The Ruffed Grouse is a more southern species and is more widespread in Algonquin, including in our hardwood forests of Sugar Maple, Beech, and Yellow Birch. Both grouse are permanent residents, taking some insects but depending mostly on plant food (especially in the winter). At that season the Ruffed Grouse subsists on the buds of deciduous trees.

In summer, most visitors see the Ruffed Grouse when it flies up with a roar of wings and glides away on fixed wings, but in spring you will almost certainly hear the famous "drumming" of the males. This is a hollow repeated thumping, starting off slowly and accelerating into a whirring roll. The bird produces this sound while standing on a fallen log or other low elevation. It is still quite generally supposed that the sound is made by the wings striking against a resonant object such as a hollow log, but it has been established beyond question that the wings do not strike anything and that the sound is produced by the beating of the wings in the air.

Young grouse are born in an advanced state of development and are able to follow their mother shortly after hatching. A common Park sight in summer is a brood of half-grown, young grouse scooting across a portage to rejoin their watchful mother, carefully advancing through the forest on the other side with slow deliberate steps and sharp eyes ever on the lookout for danger.

American Redstart

Setophaga ruticilla

Paruline flamboyante

There are many warblers featured in this book — for the excellent reason that numerous kinds occur in Algonquin. Most people are drawn to them for their beautiful, highly varied colour patterns, but they are interesting for other reasons as well. They are all basically small insect-eaters, and the only reason that so many species co-exist in the same area is that each one specializes in a particular habitat or on a particular type of insect prey.

The Redstart is quite different from all the other warblers because, rather than picking insects off vegetation, it makes its living by sallying forth to catch flying insects in the air. In this regard the Redstart has a lifestyle very similar to that of a flycatcher — particularly the Least Flycatcher with which it shares the same hardwood forest habitat. Some studies have shown that the two species do, in fact, compete against each other, with the Flycatchers tending to displace the Redstarts — at least in sunnier, more open situations.

Brown Creeper

Certhia americana

Grimpereau brun

The Brown Creeper is found in the forested regions of Canada from coast to coast and is a permanent resident over much of its range, but there are few birds that attract so little attention or are known to so few people. Its songs are one of the earliest signs of approaching spring, but the peak is well past by the opening of the fishing season at the end of April, and after that the Brown Creeper sinks back into anonymity. Blending perfectly with the assorted colours of tree trunks, it spends its life as its name suggests, creeping up the trunks of trees, searching every crevice for insects or their eggs or larvae. When it gets up toward the top where the trunk becomes smaller, it drops in a quick dive to the base of another tree and starts up again — and this goes on day after day, month after month, in the life of a Brown Creeper. It is never seen perching on a branch in the manner of conventional birds. You might expect that the Creeper would forsake its tree trunks during the nesting season, but not so. The nest is placed under a piece of loose bark on a standing tree trunk, so the Creeper has no need to change its habits even then.

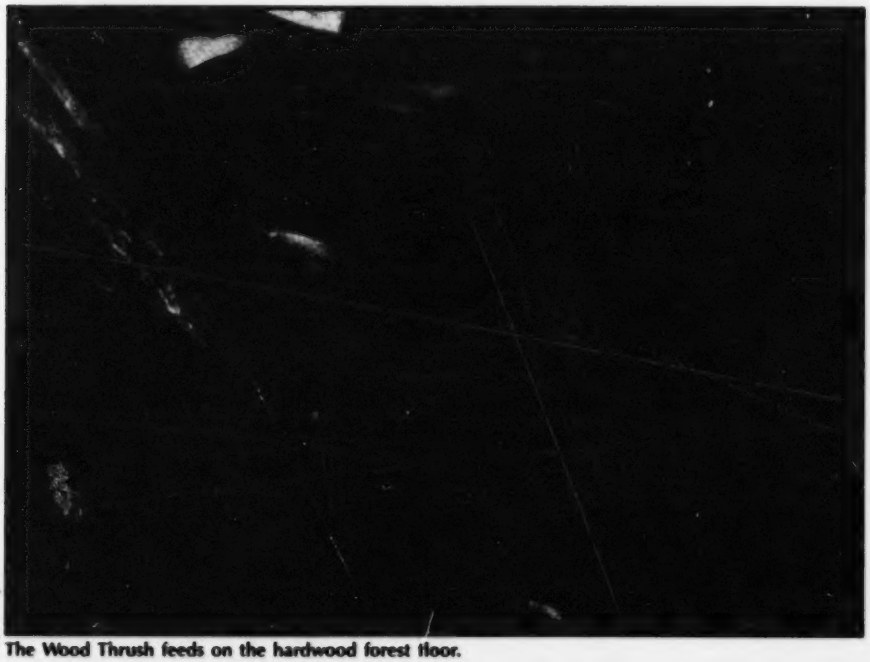
If you should notice a small brown bird hitching its way up a tree trunk, it would be time well-spent to watch it working for a few minutes. It may not be spectacular, but it is a fine example of a very successful specialist in the bird world.

Jim Flynn

Scarlet Tanager, tropical brilliance in our hardwoods.

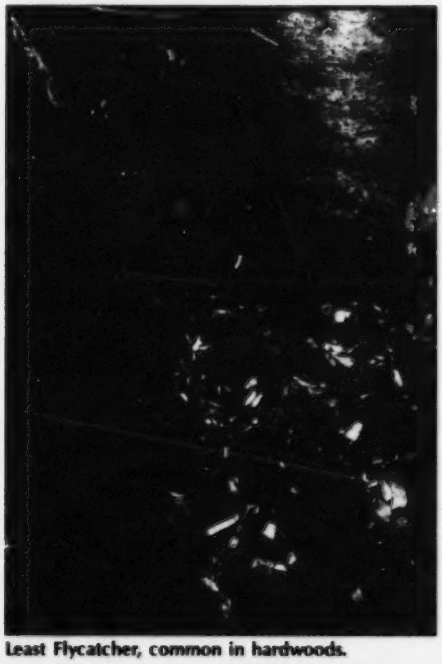
James M. Richards

Downy Woodpecker, a branch specialist.



Jim Flynn

The Wood Thrush feeds on the hardwood forest floor.

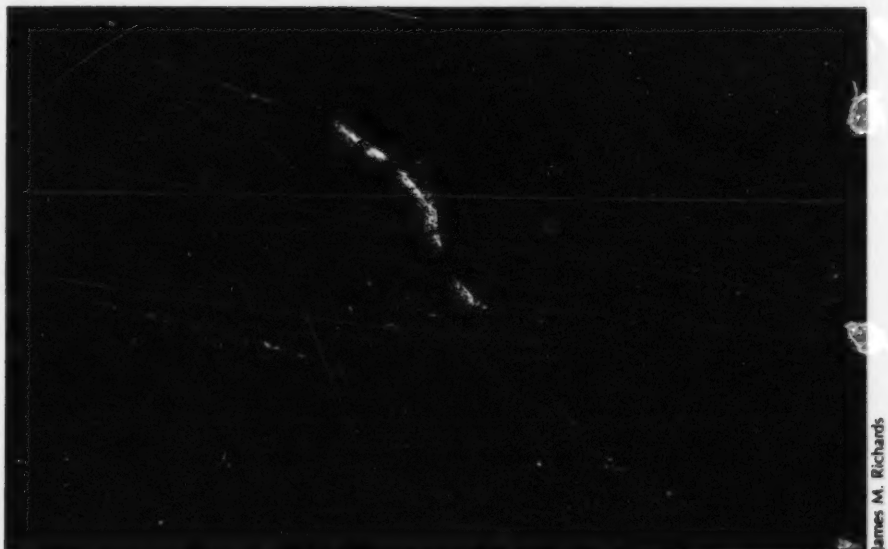


James M. Richards

Least Flycatcher, common in hardwoods.

James M. Richards

Hairy Woodpecker hunts on tree trunks.



James M. Richards

The Wood-Pewee nests here during brief summer visits from its "tropical home".

Scarlet Tanager

Piranga olivacea

Tangara écarlate

Most of the tanagers live in Central and South America, and so we are fortunate to have this one, brilliantly-coloured member of the family among our common birds. For sheer tropical brilliance, no other Algonquin bird comes close to the male Scarlet Tanager's dazzling red, set off by jet-black wings and tail. The yellowish-green female, on the other hand, is as drab as the male is spectacular.

Many other birds show similar, if less pronounced, differences between male and female, and you might very well ask why this should be so. The advantage in drab colours for a female is that her inconspicuous plumage will not draw the attention of predators to the nest. But why should males go so far in the other direction? They may not sit on the nest, but they are still far from immune to predators. The answer seems to be that the brighter the male, the better his chances of attracting a mate and leaving descendants — who will also be brilliantly-coloured. Once the breeding season is over, however, the advantage of bright colours is gone, and it is not surprising that males moult into a drab plumage very much like that of females. While they are moulting, male Scarlet Tanagers often show irregular red patches on a greenish background, and many a birder has been thrown for a loop by these very strange-looking fall birds.

There is, of course, no mistaking a male in full breeding plumage, but the Scarlet Tanager is still heard more often than seen. Even then, most people miss it because the song sounds like a Robin's but with a "burry" quality. Listen and watch for it in hardwood forests.

Wood Thrush

Hylocichla mustelina

Grive des bois

A lot more happens on the hardwood forest floor than you might think. Each year billions of Sugar Maple and other leaves flutter down to earth and add to the "duff" or leaf litter. The tonnes of organic matter support a whole host of fungi and bacteria but also tiny soil animals, insects, and other invertebrates that act to break down the dead leaves and return them to the soil. The soil invertebrates, in turn, are exploited as a food source by certain birds — the most prominent of which are the thrushes.

The Wood Thrush is the kind that specializes in drier, more upland situations of our hardwood forests. There it uses its big legs and feet to kick over dead leaves and expose prey animals, snapping them up with its bill before they can scuttle back under cover.

Hairy Woodpecker

Picoides villosus

Pic chevelu

This is good woodpecker country. All forests have dead and dying trees, which attract the wood-dwelling insects that are the staple diet of woodpeckers. Also, on the thin-soiled, rocky country of Algonquin, hardwood trees such as maple tend to develop gnarled and partly dead trunks as they mature, offering not only an abundance of woodpecker food but also favourable tree trunks in which they may excavate their nesting cavities.

The Hairy Woodpecker might be termed the generalist woodpecker of Algonquin hardwoods. It has the typical stiff tail and four toes (two pointing forward, two back) of a woodpecker. These features help it to hitch its way up tree trunks as it looks and listens for signs of insect life under the bark and in the wood. The sharp, chisel-like bill is another obvious woodpecker adaptation, but what we can't see are the even more important shock-absorbing bones in the woodpecker's head and the highly specialized, barbed tongue that can be extended well past the tip of the bill and used to pull insects out of tiny passageways and crevices inside the tree.

Downy Woodpecker

Picoides pubescens

Pic mineur

No one can doubt, looking at a Downy Woodpecker and its close relative, the Hairy Woodpecker, that both species diverged from a common ancestor in the not too distant past. Their plumages are so similar that no other explanation is reasonable, and yet it is also quite apparent that, in other ways, the two birds are very different. The Downy Woodpecker is much smaller and has a proportionately even smaller bill. This permits it to go way out on, and exploit the insect supply of, slender twigs and branch tips — places where a Hairy would obviously be at a clumsy disadvantage. In this way Downies and Hairies, while both making their living in the same basic woodpecker fashion, divide up the hardwood forest environment and do not compete for the same food.

Both species stay here all winter — although at the price of devoting almost all the daylight hours to the search for food. Such demanding work entails the risk of being taken unawares by a predator, and it points out one of the reasons why Downy Woodpeckers, among others, join flocks of chickadees and other birds instead of foraging alone. By listening for the alarm call of the other birds in a flock, a Downy can dispense with looking around for danger as it otherwise would have to, and it can concentrate more fully on the never-ending search for tiny insects hidden under the bark.

Least Flycatcher

Empidonax minimus

Moucherolle tchébec

This is the common flycatcher of our hardwood forests, but you may be forgiven if you have never noticed it. The small size, drab colours, and habit of sitting quietly while waiting for a suitable insect to fly by all combine to make Least Flycatchers extremely hard to see — even when they are in "plain view".

As with so many other forest birds, the only really practical way to get a handle on how many Least Flycatchers are out there is to learn the song. In this case it is a somewhat nasal, snappy little "chebec". It can be quite frustrating to stand in one of the loose colonies these little birds sometimes form, listening to the "chebecs" all around you, and yet being unable to spot them!

Least Flycatchers may be obscure, but that doesn't mean they aren't worthy of our respect. Consider the fact that the adults move south as soon as they have finished nesting and by late July most have left Ontario. The young stay here for another four to five weeks after that and then migrate ***completely on their own***, all the way to Mexico!

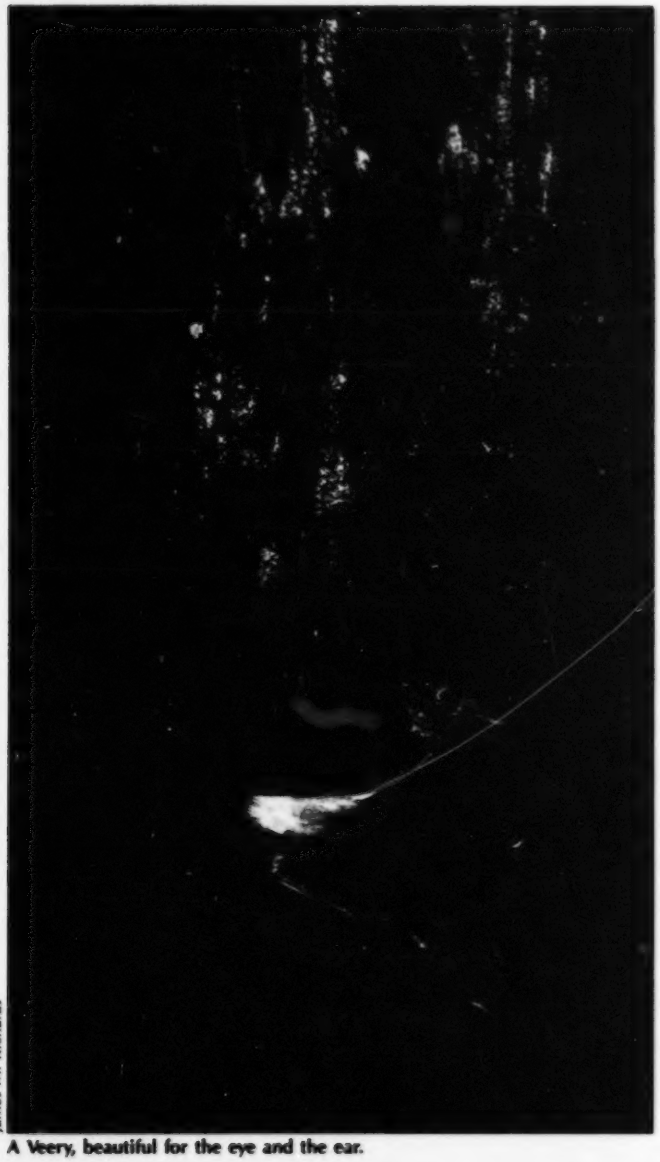
Eastern Wood-Pewee

Contopus virens

Pioui de l'Est

The Wood-Pewee is another drably coloured little flycatcher of the hardwood forest, this time specializing in the high, leafy canopy. It would normally go entirely unnoticed except that the slow whistled "pee-a-wee", after which it is named, is a prominent and easily recognized song of our summer hardwoods.

Eastern Wood-Pewees are one of the last birds to return in the spring, not usually arriving before May 23, and they seldom remain much longer than Labour Day. After that they quickly go back to what many people consider to be their real home — the rain forests of Amazonia. Interestingly enough, when Wood-Pewees are in South America, both sexes set up and defend individual territories by singing songs that only partly resemble the ones used by males during their brief summer forays up to our part of the world.



James M. Richards

A Veery, beautiful for the eye and the ear.

Veery

Catharus fuscescens

Grive fauve

The Veery is Algonquin's most common thrush. It tends to prefer damper areas of hardwoods and other forest types, and its descending melodic "spirals" are among the most beautiful songs we hear on quiet summer evenings.

Like all the forest thrushes, Veeries are far more often heard than seen. This is especially regrettable in the case of the Veery because, to our eyes at least, the russet brown of its back is one of the most beautiful colours in nature. Of course, we can be sure that the Veery's back colour was not developed to please us but rather to help render the bird all but invisible on the brown forest floor — especially in the gloom of twilight when it is most active.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak

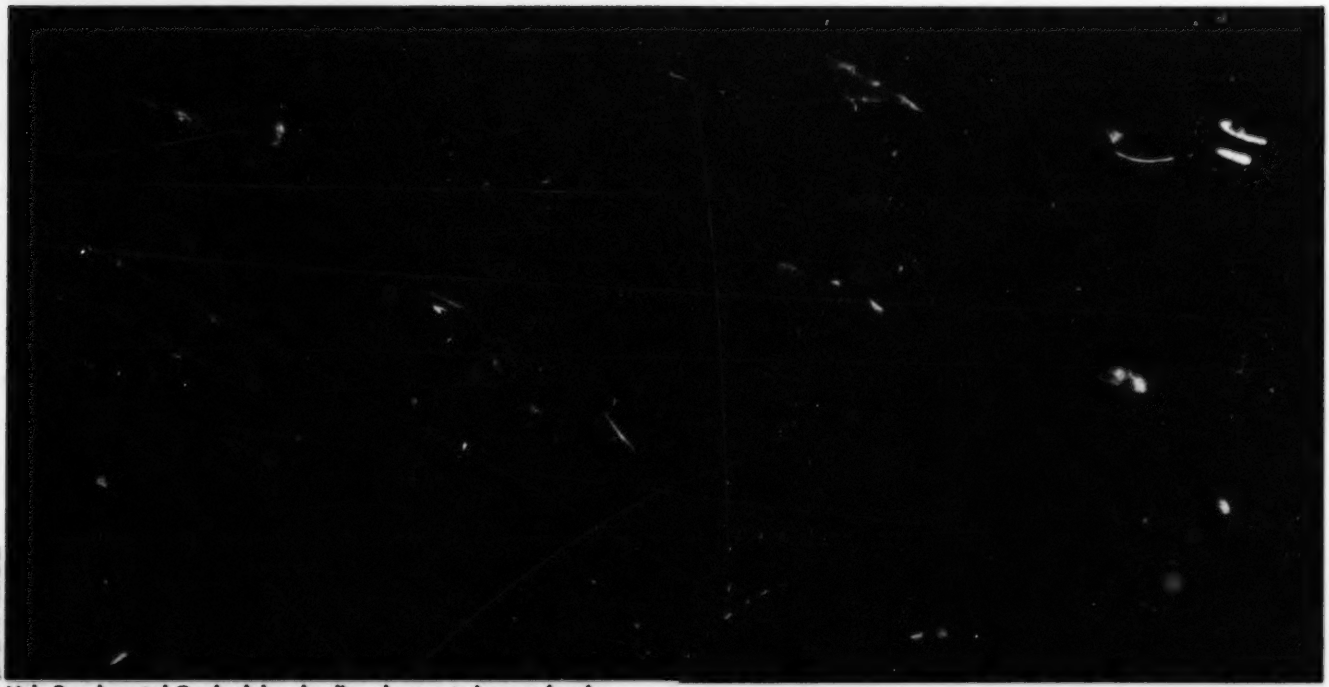
Pheucticus ludovicianus

Cardinal à poitrine rose

Rose-breasted Grosbeaks are common in Algonquin, particularly in areas of younger trees near streams. They are eaters of seeds and flowers although, as with many supposed vegetarians, they also take insects, especially when feeding rapidly growing nestlings that have high protein needs.

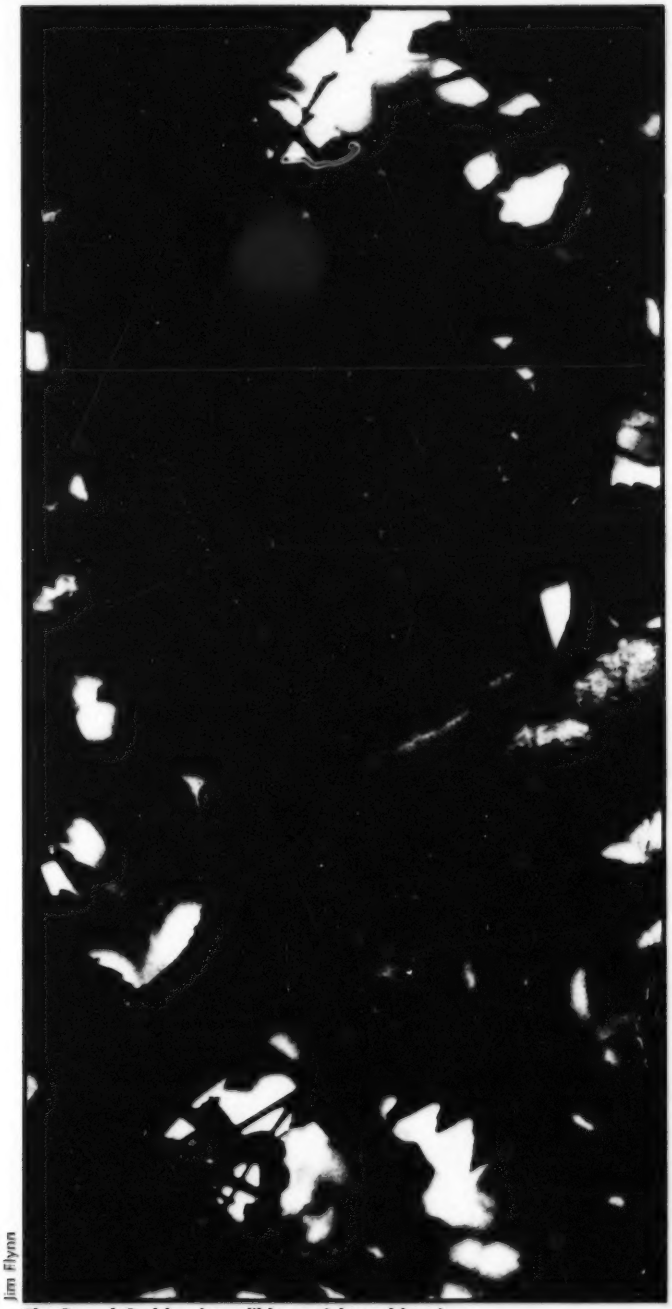
Male Rose-breasted Grosbeaks have a beautiful song (something like a Robin's but with a tremulous quality), and of course they have beautiful plumage as well. This goes further than you might realize because, in addition to the bright red V on the breast, the males are bright pink under their wings.

You might ask why they would have this colour in places that are usually hidden, but to get the answer you would have to watch a male in a courtship display. One naturalist described it as follows, "The male spread and dropped his rapidly quivering wings so low that the tips of his wings grazed the ground upon which he stood. His body was held in a crouching position with the breast almost touching the ground; his tail partly spread and slightly elevated; his head retracted so far that his nape lay against the feathers of his back. The mating song poured forth from his open beak as he moved toward the female, waving his head and body in an erratic dance. The downward and forward sweep of his wings revealed in striking contrast the blacks and whites of the separated flight feathers, the vivid rose under the wings, and the white of the rump. The song was soft, low, and continuous, with a great variety of notes". What female could resist such a display?



James M. Richards

Male Rose-breasted Grosbeak has dazzling plumage to impress females.



Jim Flynn

The Barred Owl has incredible eyesight and hearing.

Barred Owl

Strix varia

Chouette rayée

The Barred Owl is the most common owl in Algonquin and the one you are quite likely to hear. Its crazy cacklings and loud hoots, sounding like "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?", are a regular night-time feature, especially of the Park's west side. There it makes its living by preying principally on Deer Mice, the common small mammal of our hardwood forests.

Barred Owls have several special adaptations not found in other birds. They have enormous wings with lacy-edged feathers that permit very slow, silent flight. Their eyes are 100 times more sensitive than our own, and they can see objects clearly in what, to us, appears to be total darkness.

Most remarkable of all is the fact that the Barred Owl's ears (hidden just behind the feathers of the facial disk) are not only very keen but also have a different location and shape on each side of the head. This means that each ear hears the same sound slightly differently and enables the owl to pinpoint the source of the sound with uncanny accuracy. In fact, when it is too dark for even an owl to see anything, it can still locate and successfully capture mice by hearing alone. This ability is absolutely crucial in the winter when mice are almost always hidden beneath the snow. If you can imagine sitting for hours, 30 feet up in a tree on a cold winter night, waiting to hear the sound of a mouse running along a tunnel under a deep blanket of snow, and then dropping down feet first to grab the unseen victim, then you will have some idea of what every Barred Owl can, must, and does do to survive.

Pileated Woodpecker

Dryocopus pileatus

Grand Pic

The Pileated is the spectacular, crow-sized giant among the six species of woodpeckers that nest in Algonquin. Being a large bird with specialized requirements, it is not abundant but, if you spend much time in the Park, it's just a question of time before you see one undulating high over the forest or hear its loud, ringing call.

The Pileated Woodpecker eats carpenter ants and is well equipped to dig deep inside dead trees to get them. If you see large, deep rectangular holes excavated in a tree and a pile of fresh wood chips below, you can be sure that a Pileated has been in the area. This bird is evidently capable of excavating a large nest cavity for itself, but such holes have far-reaching importance for other wildlife as well. Other cavity nesters like Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers would be hard pressed to find anywhere suitable if it weren't for old Pileated nests.

James M. Richards

Cavity nests of Pileated Woodpecker are important to other wildlife.

Blackburnian Warbler

Dendroica fusca

Paruline à gorge orangée

A distinct feature of Algonquin's west side hardwood forests are scattered groves of Eastern Hemlock trees. Since they are comprised of needle-bearing evergreens, these groves provide conditions very different from those in the surrounding broad-leaved trees and, not surprisingly, there are distinctly different birds to be found there. The Blackburnian Warbler is a good example. It picks insects off leaves and twigs the way many other warblers do elsewhere in Algonquin, but this one is a real Hemlock specialist. The male Blackburnian's song is weak and easy to overlook, but few birds can surpass the almost glowing brilliance of its orange throat.

Female Blackburnians usually lay four or five eggs — which may not seem a large number. However, when you consider that the total weight of the eggs is over half the weight of the mother (who laid them at the rate of one a day), the production of those eggs stands out as a truly remarkable feat. It could probably not be done without the extra food that the males regularly feed their mates before and during the egg-laying period.

Black-throated Green Warbler

Dendroica virens

Paruline verte à gorge noire

The Black-throated Green Warbler is another common warbler in the islands of Eastern Hemlocks found within Algonquin's west side hardwoods. Every May the males return to Algonquin and, through their pleasant songs, carve territories out of the available habitat before the females arrive a week or two later.

Nests can be built anywhere up to 80 feet above the ground, and in them the females lay four or five eggs. As with all birds, this normal clutch size is the number that will give rise to the maximum number of healthy, surviving young. If more eggs were laid, the adults could not gather enough food to feed all the nestlings properly, and each young bird would leave the nest underweight and with a correspondingly slimmer chance of surviving.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

Sphyrapicus varius

Pic maculé

This, the most common of our Algonquin woodpeckers, has a very unusual feeding method. Following its return to the Park in mid-April, it drills regular rows of holes in the bark of many trees and then returns to drink the sap that flows from the wounds and to eat the insects attracted to the sap. In some cases, the Sapsucker may drill so many holes that the tree is effectively girdled and the part above the holes will die. But even when this doesn't happen, the spores of wood-rotting fungi may enter the tree through the Sapsucker wounds. As a result, the tree may be infected and weakened, leading to its premature death. Because of this, many people believe that the Sapsucker is an important agent of change in the natural forest.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Archilochus colubris

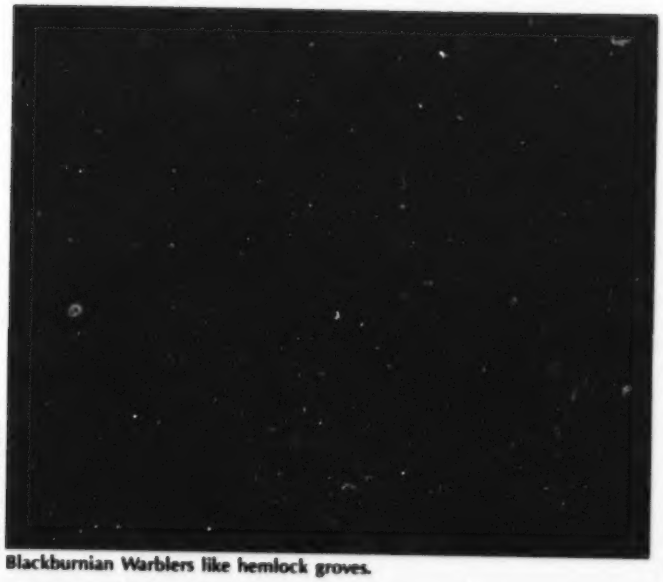
Colibri à gorge rubis

This tiny jewel of a bird, flashing with irridescent green and, in the male, ruby-red on the throat, darts so quickly from place to place that only rarely do we get a good look at one. Although there are hundreds of kinds of hummingbirds in Central and South America, the Ruby-throated is the only species that nests in this part of the world.

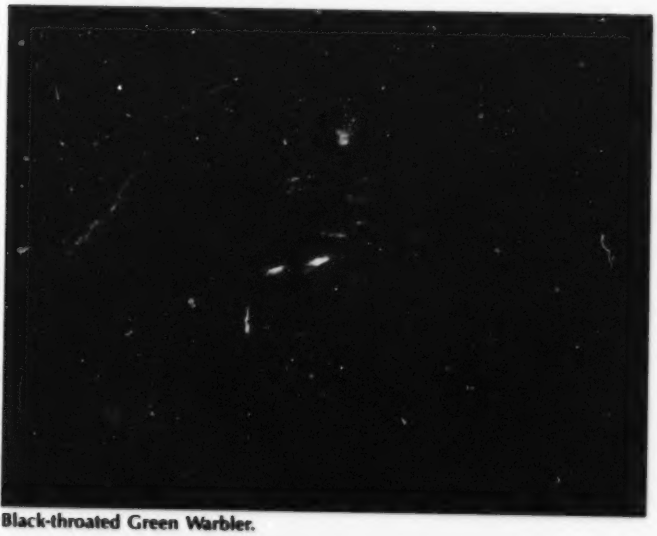
In a way, we are lucky to have even one. The fact is that hummingbirds are so tiny and burn up energy at such tremendous rates, they cannot survive without plentiful, daily supplies of high energy food. In the tropics, there are flowers in bloom all year round, and their sugar-rich nectar is always available. Here in Algonquin, however, there are no flowers suitable for hummingbirds before the month of July, and they certainly couldn't delay their return from the tropics that long.

In fact, Ruby-throats return to the Park in May and for the first two months depend on tree sap (very similar to flower nectar) that oozes from the holes left by Sapsuckers, a member of the woodpecker family also illustrated here. So dependent are hummingbirds on Sapsuckers in early summer that they will actually follow them around, and they energetically defend any sapsucker tree they find against other hummers.

Of course neither sap nor flowers are available when cool weather returns in the fall, and so, each year, our Ruby-throats fly all the way to Central America to avoid starvation. Many other birds, of course, make even longer flights, but the Ruby-throat is so tiny that the thought of its making so long a journey is just plain astounding. It even flies 800 kilometres non-stop across the Gulf of Mexico.



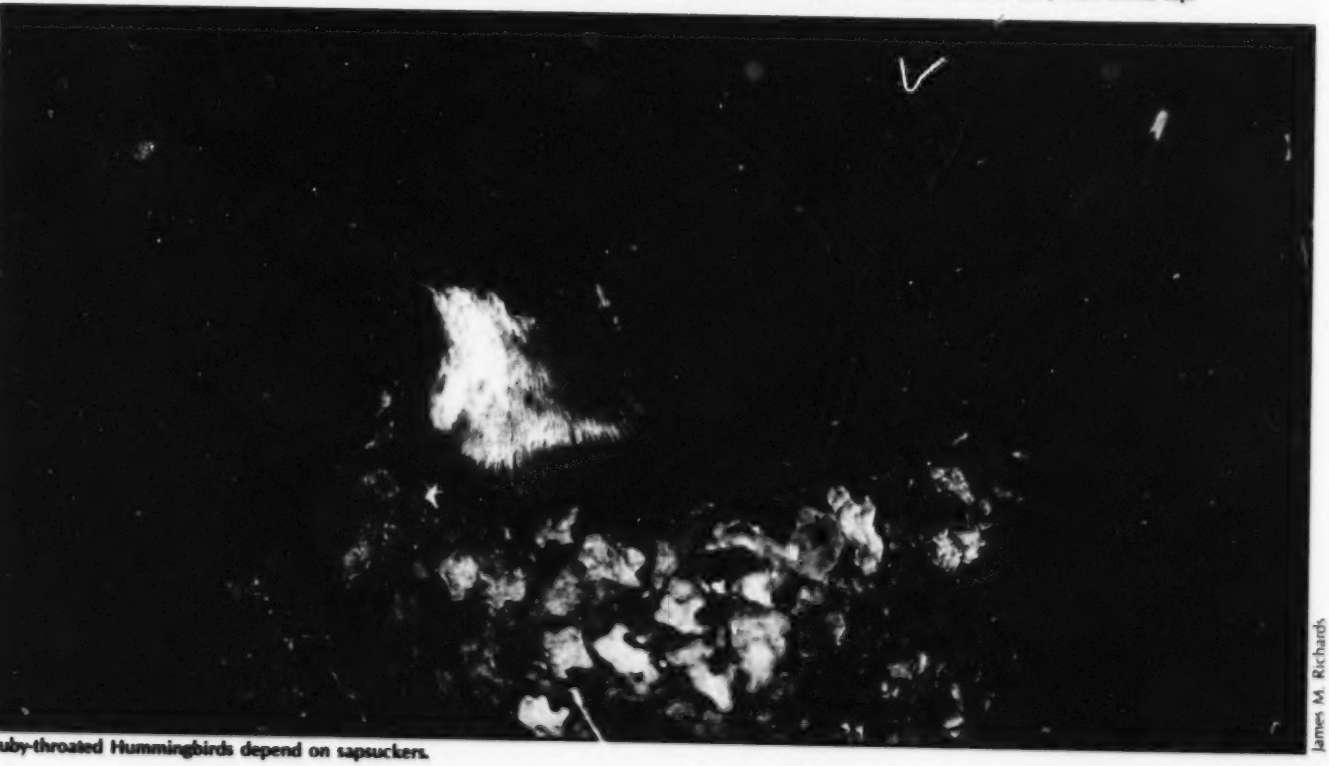
Blackburnian Warblers like hemlock groves.



Black-throated Green Warbler.

Nancy Hiscock

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker makes holes in bark, then drinks sap.



James M. Richards

uby-throated Hummingbirds depend on sapsuckers.

Birds of the Beaver Ponds

It is well known that beavers build dams and create ponds to suit their own needs. It is less often appreciated, however, that in doing so, beavers also create a succession of special environments that would otherwise be rare or non-existent in the Park. Each of these beaver-created landscapes provide unique opportunities for a set of specially adapted birds, which therefore owe their abundance, or even their very presence, in Algonquin to the activities of beavers.

When beavers flood a piece of forest, for example, the drowned trees die and are attacked by insects, and this in turn attracts woodpeckers, including one species that makes a special practice of flaking the bark off dead trees to reveal the insects underneath. Woodpecker nest holes then provide ideal nest cavities for other birds attracted to the beaver pond for other reasons.

When the dead trees finally fall and give way to an open pond, the warm, shallow waters are perfect for the production of plants and insects, and these support a whole new community of birds. There are swallows and flycatchers that make a living from the flying insects that hatch out from the pond; there are ducks that graze on the high output of aquatic plants and animals; and there is a long-legged heron that stalks the shallows in search of frogs and minnows.

Even after the beavers move on and the dam falls into disrepair, the pond continues to provide special conditions for special birds. The exposed mud of a drained pond is quickly colonized by grasses and sedges and becomes a so-called "beaver meadow." Here, conditions are just right for grasshoppers, frogs that eat grasshoppers, snakes that eat frogs and, finally, for a bird that eats snakes — the Broad-winged Hawk, Algonquin's most common bird of prey.

American Black Duck

Anas rubripes

Canard noir

Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

Canard colvert

Although these ducks look strikingly different from each other, we discuss them together because their stories are inextricably connected. Before 1970, it was very unusual to see a Mallard in Algonquin. The Black Duck, the beaver pond duck of eastern North America, was our species and the Mallard, though closely related, was more prevalent to the west of us. Perhaps in response to human alteration of the landscape, however, Mallards have been moving steadily eastward into Black Duck country, hybridizing with them and, in many areas, completely replacing them. This has not yet happened in Algonquin, but the once rare Mallards are now common here and, during migration, we have many sightings of crosses between the two species. It was once thought, thanks to work carried out at our own Wildlife Research Station in Algonquin, that Black Ducks held sway in the forested east because of superior resistance to a disease called avian malaria. Now it appears that the disease is no longer a barrier to Mallards, and we may be witnessing the replacement of one species by another.

We know that such events must have occurred hundreds of thousands of times in Earth's long history, but individual humans have such fleetingly short lifespans that we have to be very lucky to actually see such an event unfold before our eyes.

Eastern Kingbird

Tyrannus tyrannus

Tyran tritri

You may be familiar with this flycatcher from rural, agricultural areas back home. Here, in forested Algonquin Park, it is primarily a bird of beaver ponds or, less often, of lakeshores or wide, open bogs. The kingbird is a dragonfly specialist, and the shallow waters of beaver ponds are ideal for the predatory aquatic larvae of these insects. When they emerge to hunt, mate, and lay eggs, the kingbirds are waiting for them and, as powerful and as manoeuverable in the air as they may be, dragonflies are no match for their devastatingly effective predator.

The kingbird's scientific name translates roughly as "tyrant of tyrants," a reference to the extreme belligerence with which male kingbirds, at least, attack crows, ravens, or hawks that come close to an active kingbird nest. Presumably this aggressiveness makes up for the fact that kingbirds usually build their nests in plain view, out in exposed stubs or dead trees above water where they would normally have little chance of escaping the notice and attention of a hungry predator.

Hooded Merganser

Lophodytes cucullatus

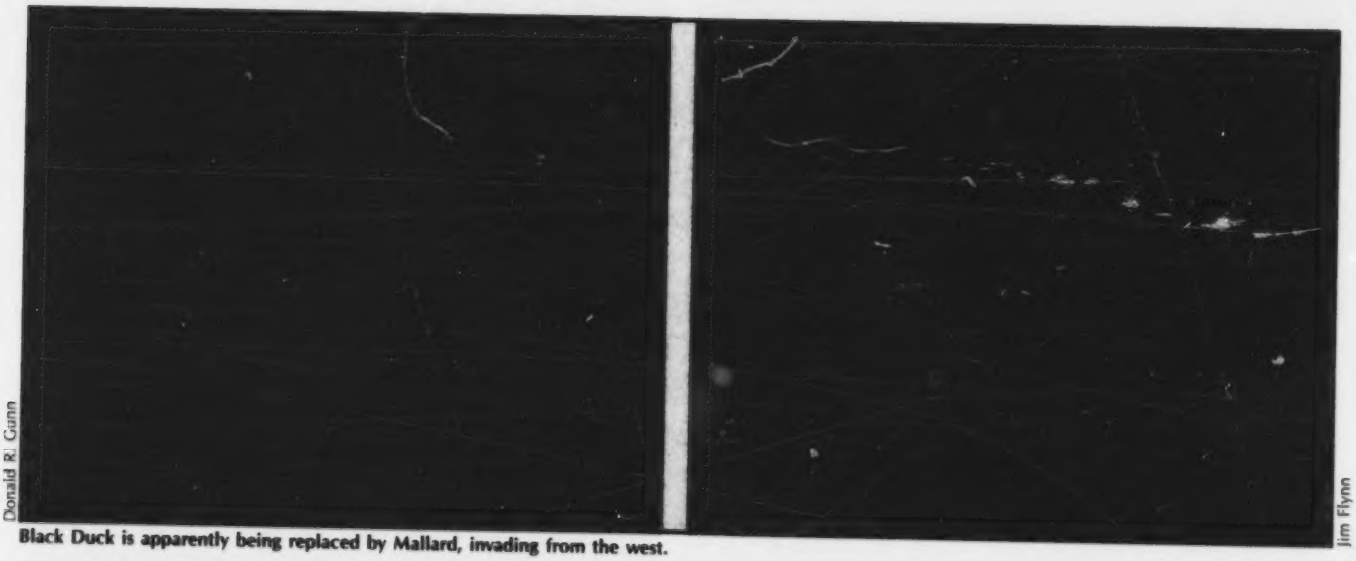
Bec-scie couronné

Another spectacular beaver pond duck that nests in tree cavities, the Hooded Merganser is a fish-eater. Like its larger relative of lakes and rivers (the Common Merganser), this species seizes its prey with a specialized, slightly hooked, and serrated bill. Hoodies return as soon as there is any open water in early April, and the sight of beautiful males courting their females on creeks and lakes along the highway is a sure sign of spring. Shortly afterwards, however, these little ducks disappear to thousands of hidden beaver ponds back in the bush, and all summer long we are barely aware of their presence.

In fall they begin to become visible again, often inhabiting larger bodies of water where we are more likely to see them. Indeed, long after other birds have left the Park, Hooded Mergansers continue to hunt for minnows, oblivious to the increasingly bitter cold. Only when our larger lakes start to freeze in early December are these beautiful little ducks finally forced to leave.

Algonquin Park Museum

Algonquin beaver ponds form a distinct habitat for birds and other wildlife.



Donald R. Gunn

Jim Flynn

Black Duck is apparently being replaced by Mallard, invading from the west.

James M. Richards

Eastern Kingbird, dragonfly-eater.

Barry Flahey

Hooded Mergansers.

Wood Duck

Aix sponsa

Canard branchu

Drake Wood Ducks are, in the opinion of many people, the most dazzling birds in Algonquin. It is hard to dispute this, but in some ways, the relatively drab females and young are even more spectacular. This species nests in relatively large tree cavities — places that offer considerable protection from predators but which, because of their scarcity, are not always as close to the water or the ground as the ducks might like. How, in fact, does a mother Wood Duck get her 10 to 15 ducklings down from a cavity that is 15 metres up in a tree and then perhaps as much as 500 metres to the food and safety of the nearest beaver pond?

During the last two or three days before hatching, baby Wood Ducks penetrate the air space at one end of the egg and begin "talking to" and listening to their mother. Through this they learn the exact sound of her voice, and somehow they co-ordinate themselves so as to all hatch out in the space of a few hours. Then, apparently responding to a signal from the female, they literally throw themselves out of the nest cavity and fall to the ground far below. The troop reassembles and sets out on foot to the distant beaver pond following the by then familiar sound of mother's voice.

Great Blue Heron

Ardea herodias

Grand Héron

The Great Blue Heron is the tall, bluish-gray bird you may see standing beside a lake or beaver pond waiting for a fish or frog to come within reach of its long neck and spear-like bill.

If you are really lucky you might chance upon a breeding colony of large, tree-top nests on an island or at the edge of a boggy lake. The sight of these great birds flying about and landing awkwardly in the trees, punctuated by the loud, guttural cries of the young, is not soon forgotten. There may be in the order of 25 active colonies, or "heronries," in the Park in any given year. They tend to last for a few years and then be abandoned, possibly when the accumulated excrement starts to kill the trees. Heronries in Algonquin also tend to be small (5 to 15 nests and never more than 50). This is almost certainly a reflection of the fact that Algonquin Park lying on hard, sterile bedrock, produces relatively little food, and the area within easy flying distance of a colony can support only a limited number of adult herons and their young.

Tree Swallow

Tachycineta bicolor

Hirondelle bicolore

Swallows hunt their insect prey on the wing. They fly with such speed and effortless grace that you might think they lead an easy life. In fact, they have many problems to contend with and really live "on the edge" of what is possible. To nest and raise young, for example, they need suitable tree cavities — often those left by woodpeckers in standing dead trees near the water of beaver ponds. Cavities are in short supply, however, so in order to take possession of a suitable hole before it is claimed by rivals, Tree Swallows must return to the Park in spring as soon as they possibly can. Indeed, we usually see Tree Swallows by April 10, before most ice has gone out and before any obvious insect food is available. Needless to say, things may be tough for a few weeks until spring really arrives and, even then, there is no guarantee that a late winter snow storm won't turn a bad situation into an outright disaster.

Assuming they do make it through these dangers, nesting Tree Swallows have little time to waste because the season of flying insects in Algonquin — believe it or not — is a very short one. By late July the supply begins to dwindle rapidly and before the end of August nearly all our swallows have usually forsaken the Park for nearby areas of Ontario where insects persist longer into the fall.

Donald R. Gunn

Broad-winged Hawk in flight.

Broad-winged Hawk

Buteo platypterus

Petite Buse

Beaver ponds in Algonquin normally go through a series of stages — from an area of drowned trees to open water. Eventually the pond will be abandoned, at least temporarily, and without the beavers to maintain the dam, the pond often drains and becomes a so-called "beaver meadow." Such areas are favourite hunting grounds for Algonquin's most common bird of prey, the Broad-winged Hawk. Not only is there excellent visibility from numerous meadowside perches, but also the long grasses of the meadow are just right for Leopard Frogs and then in turn for the Garter Snakes that eat the frogs. Snakes seem to be a preferred prey of Broad-wings, and you won't have to spend a lot of time in Algonquin before you see one of these hawks carrying a snake in its talons, presumably for a nestful of hungry hawklets somewhere back in the forest.

The good hunting conditions of a beaver meadow are partly duplicated by Highway 60, and keeping an eye out for Broad-wings on the wires or telephone poles along the highway is an excellent way to spot a few as you cross the Park.

Black-backed Woodpecker

Picoides arcticus

Pic à dos noir

We don't normally think of woodpeckers as inhabitants of beaver ponds, but the Black-backed Woodpecker really does have an association with such wet places. When beavers dam a creek they flood the forest upstream; the trees then die and are quickly invaded by insects. This, of course, is what attracts the Black-backed Woodpeckers and makes Algonquin beaver ponds such good places to see them.

Black-backs are different from most woodpeckers in a number of ways. For one thing, they have only three toes (two in front, one behind) rather than having the four-toed arrangement (two in front, two behind) of other woodpeckers. Also, rather than having red somewhere on their head the way at least the males of most woodpeckers do, the male Black-backed Woodpecker has a patch of orangey yellow.

Most important of all is the different way this species hunts for food. Instead of drilling holes into wood in classic woodpecker fashion, the Black-backed specializes in knocking flakes of bark off dead trees, thus exposing insects underneath — not to mention the wood as well. Freshly debarked, dead spruce trees are often a good sign that a Black-backed Woodpecker is working the area.

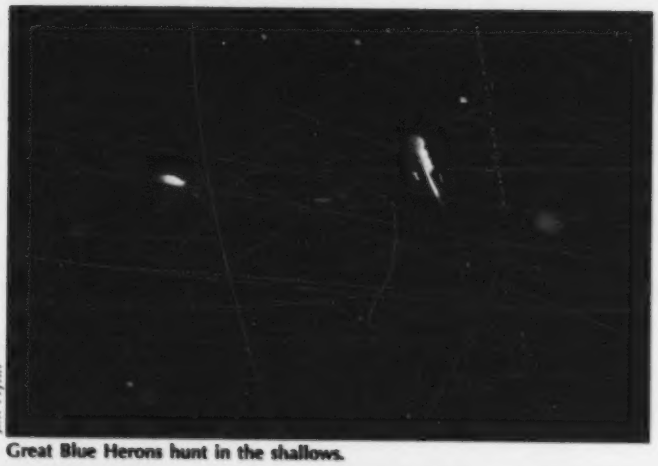
There is nothing unusual, however, in this species' nesting behaviour. It excavates a tree cavity the same as any other woodpecker, and the holes it leaves in the dead trees out in our beaver ponds are important for other cavity nesters that will come later — birds like the Tree Swallow, also illustrated and discussed on this page.

Jim Flynn

Wood Ducks live in Algonquin beaver ponds.

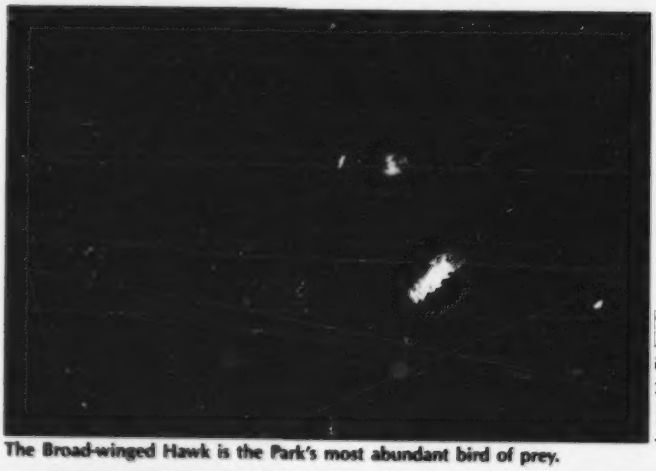
George K. Peck

Female Wood Duck at nest hole.



Jim Flynn

Great Blue Herons hunt in the shallows.



James M. Richards

The Broad-winged Hawk is the Park's most abundant bird of prey.

James M. Richards

Tree Swallow at its cavity nest.

George K. Peck

Black-backed Woodpecker nest cavities are used later by other birds.

Birds of the Lakes and Rivers

The 1500 or so lakes of Algonquin account for only about 10 percent of the Park's area, but they loom much larger in our consciousness because of our strong tendency to camp beside, and travel on, the water. Because Algonquin lakes are cold and deep with rocky shores and low nutrient levels, they produce very little in the way of aquatic plants and animals that could support ducks. The only kind that regularly uses park lakes, in fact, is a fish-eating variety, the Common Merganser, and most of the few other birds that extract a living from Algonquin lakes are fish-eaters as well. But, while they are few in number, the birds of our waterways include what many people consider to be the Park's most outstanding species — the Common Loon, Ontario's provincial bird and the very symbol of wild northern country.

Herring Gull

Larus argentatus

Goéland argenté

When you see a "sea gull" in Algonquin you can be reasonably confident that the bird is a Herring Gull. White and gray in colour and as big as a raven, it is seen most often around lakes, soaring in the air or resting on the water or rocks. It is a confirmed scavenger, feeding mostly on dead fish, fish remains discarded by humans, and other refuse.

The Herring Gull nests throughout the Park, usually in small colonies on small islands. The nests themselves are simple structures placed on the ground or often in a depression on bare rock. Even on an island such nests are highly vulnerable to predators, but this is partly made up for by the fact that young Herring Gulls are quite mobile even at the age of three or four days. When an enemy approaches they rapidly head for cover or take to the water. Even with this ability, however, Herring Gull colonies often suffer from human disturbance. During the June breeding season we would be contributing to the preservation of our natural environment if we appreciated our gulls from a distance. With their white plumage and graceful flight, Herring Gulls add much to the atmosphere of our waterways.

Osprey

Pandion haliaetus

Balbuzard

The Osprey is another fish-eating bird, albeit one that uses a distinctly different technique. Soaring above the water at a height of 30-40 metres, it waits for a suitable fish to show itself near the surface, then plummets downward, breaking the water feet first, and attempts to seize the prey in its razor sharp talons. If successful, it will laboriously carry its prize (always head first) back to its nest or other suitable eating platform.

In any one year there are probably no more than 30 nesting pairs of Ospreys in the 7600 km² of Algonquin Park but, for such a scarce bird, they are reasonably conspicuous. Their hunting technique renders them highly visible, of course, but so do their nests. These are built of large sticks in the tops of tall dead trees and often near well-travelled canoe routes. The birds add to them every spring, and frequently they attain truly enormous sizes and become well known Park landmarks for many years.

Common Merganser

Mergus merganser

Grand Bec-scie

The Common Merganser is one of the few duck that makes a living here, and that is because it is a fish-eater. Mergansers lac the flat, water-straining beaks of most ducks and have thin fish-grabbing bills instead, complete with saw-like serrations that assist in holding on to their slippery prey.

This species keeps to shorelines and rivers away from bigger, more open bodies of water. This may be because there are mor minnows and other small fish in such protected areas, but it may also be one of the ways mergansers avoid contact with loons (which won't hesitate to kill their smaller competitors if they can).

Mergansers return to the Park as soon as the first ice melts in early April. The striking males (white and black bodies, dark green heads, and bright red bills) leave for parts unknown two months or so later, as soon as the mating season is over. The gray-bodied, chestnut-headed females stay on to incubate their eggs in tree cavities, and during the summer it is common to encounter females leading communal broods of 15 to 25 youngsters swimming along the shore or pattering across the water to escape the imagined danger of an approaching canoe.

Belted Kingfisher

Ceryle alcyon

Martin-pêcheur d'Amérique

Because it is always found near water and because we have so many lakes and streams, the kingfisher may be seen throughout the Park, although we generally see only one, or two at the most, at one time. A robust, blue and white bird with a short tail, big, crested head, and prominent bill, it is often seen along the highway, perched on a wire or flying across the road giving its loud rattling call.

Kingfishers hunt by lunging into the water from a perch and seizing a minnow. Having made a successful strike, they return to the same, or similar, nearby perch and hammer the prey thoroughly with their bill before swallowing it whole. This "pre-softening" procedure presumably helps the process of digestion, but even then the kingfisher is not capable of digesting fish bones. This is why the kingfisher, along with many other flesh-eating birds that swallow their prey whole, have the habit of coughing up pellets of undigestible material, such as bones and scales. The presence of these pellets often indicates a kingfisher's favourite hunting perch.

The kingfisher stands out from other Algonquin birds in its manner of making a living, and it is also one of the very few that burrow into the ground to make a nest. Young kingfishers hatch out at the end of a tunnel 1 to 3 metres long, dug horizontally into a vertical bank of sand or gravel.

Completing this list of oddball features, the kingfisher is unique among Algonquin nesting birds in that the female is more brightly coloured than the male. Both sexes have a blue band across the upper breast, but the female also has a chestnut-coloured stripe below this and extending down each flank.

Barry Lahey

A brood of Common Mergansers on an Algonquin lake.

James N. Richards

Herring Gulls, waterway scavengers.

George K. Peck

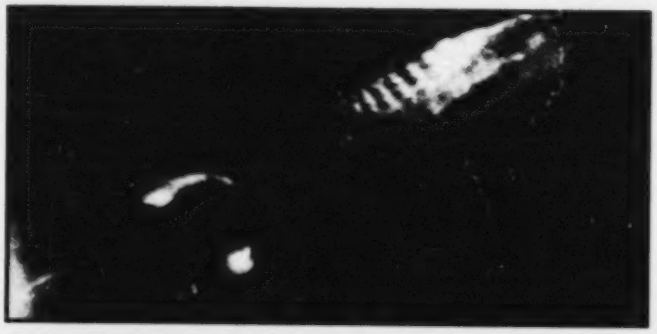
Female Common Merganser is abandoned by male after mating.

Jim Flynn

The Osprey plunges into water for fish.

Jim Flynn

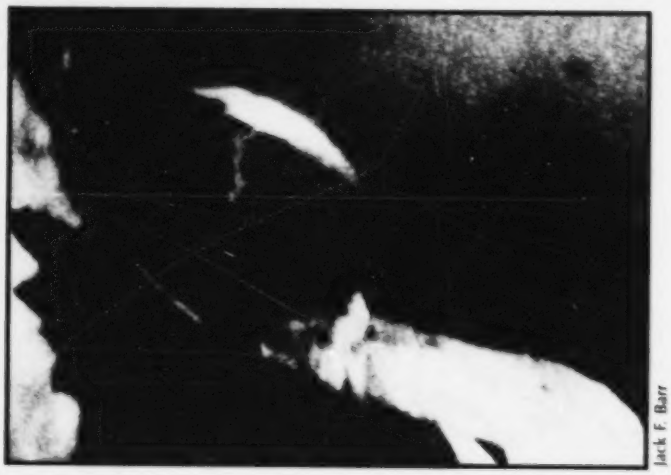
Belted Kingfishers nest in burrows.



Jack F. Barr

Jack F. Barr

Rare underwater shots taken in Lake Opeongo show how loon, cruising above bottom, is able to pursue zig-zagging fish (in this case sharply to the left) by simultaneously kicking backwards with its right leg, and forward and out to the side with its left leg, the web fully open.



Jack F. Barr

Common Loon

Gavia immer

Huart à collier

The Common Loon, the bird on this book's cover, is the one that most impresses visitors to Algonquin. Just about every lake in the Park has one or more pairs, and this, plus the bird's large size and incomparably wild, stirring cries, which can often be heard two or three kilometers away, all combine to make a profound impact.

Even at that, however, we hardly ever see loons at their best — which is most definitely underwater. Although they seldom stay under longer than three minutes and the average dive lasts only about 45 seconds, loons are nevertheless superbly adapted to a life of hunting fish down below in the clear waters of Algonquin lakes. Their streamlined bodies and powerful, webbed feet, set at the rear of the body, make for maximum efficiency. They are capable of astonishing speed and lightning-quick, underwater pivots in their quests for fish, which are seized by equally quick thrusts of the bill.

This underwater perfection, however, is achieved at a certain price. The wings, which are folded out of the way when the loon is pursuing fish, are just big enough to permit the loon to fly; rapid acceleration and manoeuverability in flight are out of the question. Nor is a loon capable of springing into the air and flying off the way most birds do. Instead it must run and flap along the surface for a long distance to get up the necessary speed. The loon's legs, positioned at the very rear of the body, are very effective underwater but put the loon at a real disadvantage on land. In fact, about all a loon is capable of is awkwardly and slowly waddling in an upright position or flopping along on its belly using both feet and wings.

Not surprisingly, a loon's nest is placed on the ground so close to the shore that the birds rarely have to travel more than a metre on land, and often they can slide from the nest directly into the water. The nest may be no more than a hollow in the ground but is usually a low pile of dead vegetation with a shallow depression in the centre. Two eggs are normally laid, and these are quite large, measuring about 6 by 9 cm. A few hours after hatching, the young enter the water, already able to swim and dive, and from then until they are able to fly, in the fall, they are seldom out of sight of their watchful parents. Most of our loons have migrated by early November, but they are back as soon as the ice is out of the lakes in late April or early May.

There we have a condensed account of the life cycle of the Common Loon, but this tells us little of the profound impression left by this bird on those who are privileged to know it in its natural habitat. Yet it is not the bird itself but its voice that produces this effect. As A.C. Bent asked in his *Life Histories of North American Birds*, "Who has ever paddled a canoe, or cast a fly, or pitched a tent in the north woods and has not stopped to listen to this wail of the wilderness"? And from Dr. Lester Scott, who brought his family to camp here every summer for 25 years in the early days, "The cold, balsam-laden air and the call of the loon were my first impression of Algonquin Park nights, and still mark that land as different for me".

Indeed, as one of the memories of summer in Algonquin, the call of the loon is known to hundreds of thousands of people all across North America. But this does not mean that we can take our loons for granted or assume that the protection afforded by the Park is a guarantee for their future survival. To begin with, park or no park, our loons must leave Algonquin every fall and spend the winter off the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the U.S., and there they may unwittingly eat fish contaminated with man-created poisons. Two decades ago we were afraid that our loons were in danger of consuming so much DDT in this manner that, like other birds, they would lose their ability to lay normal, viable eggs. Now, with the severe restrictions on DDT, this particular danger seems to have passed, but other poisons may be even more devastating.

Massive winter die-offs of loons have been observed on the American coasts, with mercury poisoning the suspected cause. Even back here, in the supposed haven of Algonquin Park, loons are not assured of a summer respite against human pollution. The acid rain and snow that now fall in Algonquin could, over time, cause our sensitive lakes to lose their ability to support fish life, and with no fish, of course, there could be no loons.

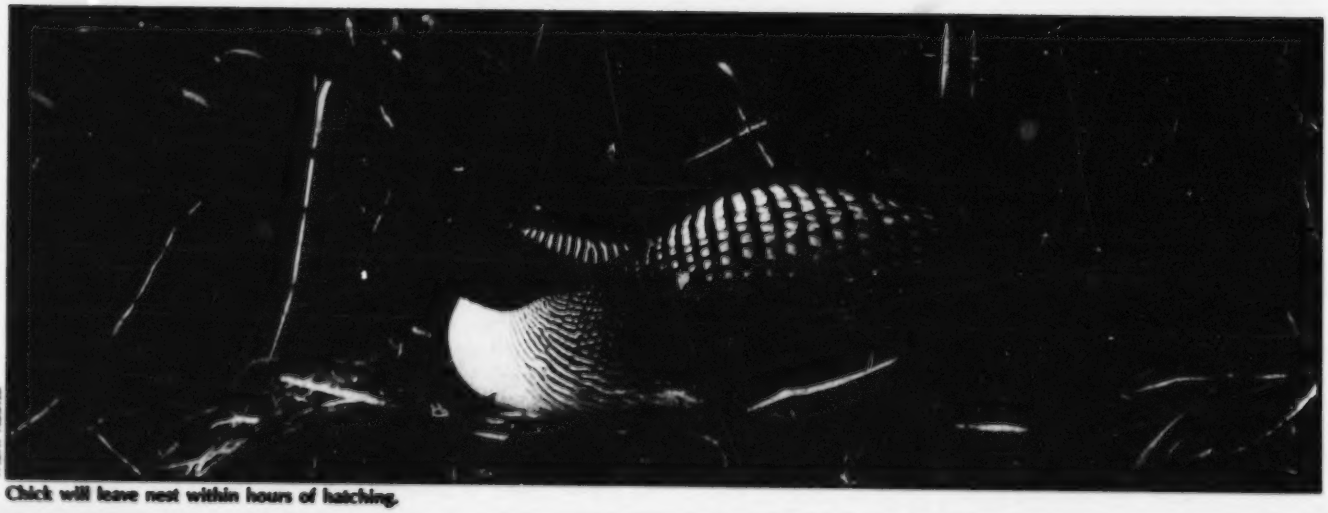
So far, we are glad to say, there is no evidence that this is actually happening. Even the most chemically sensitive of Algonquin's lakes do not seem to be acidifying, and the annual surveys of Park loons carried out by staff and interested visitors have not revealed any downward trends in either the number of loons here or in their reproductive success. Needless to say, we hope that this reassuring picture continues to hold true and that future generations of Park visitors will always have loons to enjoy.

Michael W.F. Runtz

Loons are almost helpless on land and invariably nest at the water's edge.

Michael W.F. Runtz

Loons mate "for life" but will accept a replacement if partner dies.



Mark Kabisz

Chick will leave nest within hours of hatching.

Birds of the Roadsides and other Disturbed Areas

Although we correctly think of Algonquin as a wild area still containing the same basic natural environment it did hundreds of years ago, it is also true that we humans have had, and continue to have, a noticeable effect on the Park and its birdlife.

The clearings and clearing edges left by old lumber camps and supply depots, cut-back roadsides, and campgrounds are new and different habitats that are exploited by birds that would otherwise be rare here or altogether absent. The old airfield south of km 31 near Lake of Two Rivers, for example, is a reliable place to look for such field birds as the Savannah Sparrow and the Bobolink which, elsewhere in Algonquin, are restricted to a few exceptionally large, open bogs in the Park Interior.

Bobolink

Dolichonyx oryzivorus

Goglu

The Bobolink is a handsome blackbird commonly found in grassy fields of agricultural Ontario. Here in the Park it can be encountered in similar, man-created, open areas, such as the old airfield at Lake of Two Rivers or the occasional abandoned depot farm cleared years ago by loggers wanting to raise a few crops for themselves and their horses.

The interesting question is where the Bobolink lived in Algonquin — and elsewhere in eastern North America — before we humans came along to transform forests into suitable, field-type habitats. As it turns out, the Park does have a tiny handful of truly natural islands of Bobolink habitat. These are huge open bogs, places like Hailstorm Creek off Lake Opeongo and the Hogan Lake "marsh" in the centre of the Park. It is an interesting experience to canoe through such places in May or June when you can listen to the gurgling flight songs of Bobolinks high over your head and realize that you are seeing the birds live as they did thousands of years ago before the transformation of North America.

American Woodcock

Scolopax minor

Bécasse d'Amérique

The woodcock is an outstanding example of a bird that is common, particularly in areas that have been disturbed or partly cleared by humans, but that we rarely ever see. This bird is an earthworm specialist, mostly active at night when it probes the soft earth of low-lying areas with its extraordinarily long, super-sensitive bill. Even if you do come across one in the day time, you may still not actually see it because the woodcock is very well camouflaged and quite apt to stand perfectly still and remain all but invisible.

About the only time woodcocks could be called conspicuous is on warm May evenings shortly after they have returned from the south. Even then you probably won't see them, but the air will be filled with their nasal "beeps" and the sounds of their courtship flights. The males spiral high into the night sky on whistling wings and then zig-zag back to earth, making an emphatic, musical "chippering" sound that attracts the invisible females.

Evening Grosbeak

Coccothraustes vespertinus

Gros-bec errant

The summer visitor to Algonquin can hardly help but notice compact flocks of the bright yellow, black, and white Evening Grosbeak. Noisy, quarrelsome, and with strikingly beautiful plumage, they are especially conspicuous along the highway shoulders to which they are attracted by the inexhaustible supply of grit and fine gravel. Like other seed-eaters, the grosbeaks swallow this material to help grind up seeds in their crops before digestion. At times, Evening Grosbeaks seem to be everywhere in the Park, but as a matter of fact, the bird is a relative newcomer and was virtually unknown here when Algonquin Park was established in the last century. Originally a bird of western North America, this grosbeak has extended its range into our part of the continent, possibly as a result of man's alteration of our eastern forests. Logging and fires favour the growth of sun-loving trees and shrubs, including such species as Pin Cherries and Choke Cherries, which are very important to Evening Grosbeaks. The birds utterly disdain the fruit but, remarkably, are quite fond of the cherry stones. Their powerful bills can easily deliver the 11 kg (25 pounds) of pressure required to crack them open. Anyone who has listened to a flock of Grosbeaks working over a grove of cherry trees won't doubt that these birds have benefitted from man's disturbance of the original forest.

Chestnut-sided Warbler

Dendroica pensylvanica

Paruline à flancs marron

Warblers are the delight and despair of birders, who find a real challenge in their many colour variations, which change with age, sex, and season. But good looks are not the only quality that makes this family noteworthy. The subtle variations in habitat requirements shown by the warblers might amaze people who imagine that "bush is just bush". Nothing could be further from the truth for a warbler. All of them are eaters of small insects, and the only way so many species have successfully competed with each other is by each becoming more efficient than all the rest in at least one special type of habitat.

With such narrow requirements, it is not surprising that man-made changes in the forest, however slight they might appear at first glance, have made a great difference to the warblers of Algonquin. Today, one of the most common species in the Park and in many forested regions of eastern Canada, is the Chestnut-sided Warbler. Yet, not 200 years ago, the great pioneer naturalist, Audubon, spent a lifetime studying birds all over the continent and saw only one individual of this species. In Audubon's day, the forests were more mature — consisting of large, old trees, which let very little sunlight reach the ground. Since the Chestnut-sided Warbler requires brushy, sunny clearings, it is not surprising that its numbers increased stupendously when man destroyed the primeval forest, creating millions of brushy clearings. In Algonquin, ideal conditions for the Chestnut-sided are continually being created anew — even with today's modern logging practices.

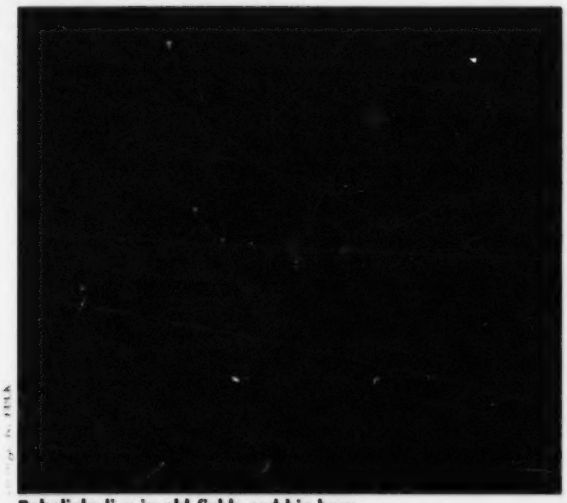
Indigo Bunting

Passerina cyanea

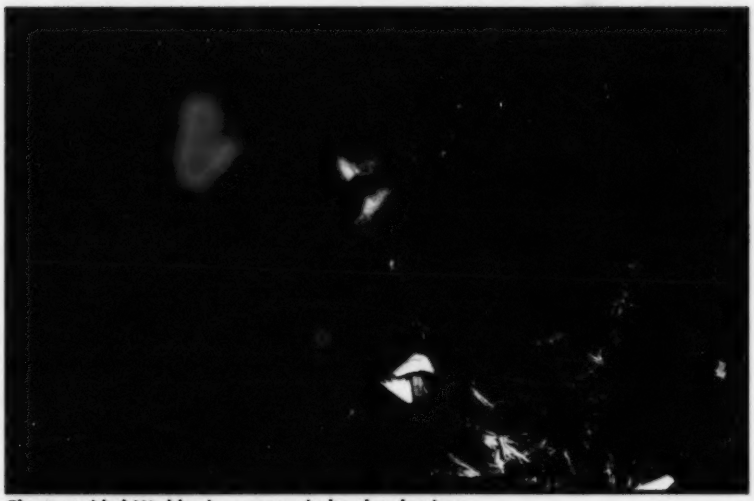
Passerin indigo

Indigo Buntings are beautiful, almost tropical looking, little blue finches that seem to prefer disturbed, "forest-edge" types of situations. Right along the Frank MacDougall Parkway (Highway 60) is an excellent place to look for Indigo Buntings, although their numbers vary unpredictably. Some years they are almost completely absent, while at other times they seem to be "everywhere."

In addition to their good looks, male Indigo Buntings are accomplished singers. Their songs always convey the same basic information ("I am a magnificent male Indigo Bunting in breeding condition — girls welcome, guys get lost"). Interestingly, each individual male has his own distinct song (rarely two), and he sticks to it, day in and day out. By doing so he communicates to his neighbours that it is just the same familiar bird guarding his own established territory but posing no particular threat to anyone else. If he were to change his song, the neighbours would have no way of knowing it wasn't a stranger attempting to set up a new territory and very likely to steal all or parts of their land. The neighbours would, therefore, have little choice but to attack, and the male who came up with the different song would have got himself into a lot of unnecessary trouble. By the same token, it would be no good if all birds sang identical songs because, once again, neighbours would be unable to identify each other.



Bobolinks live in old fields and big bogs.



Chestnut-sided Warbler is common in brushy clearings.

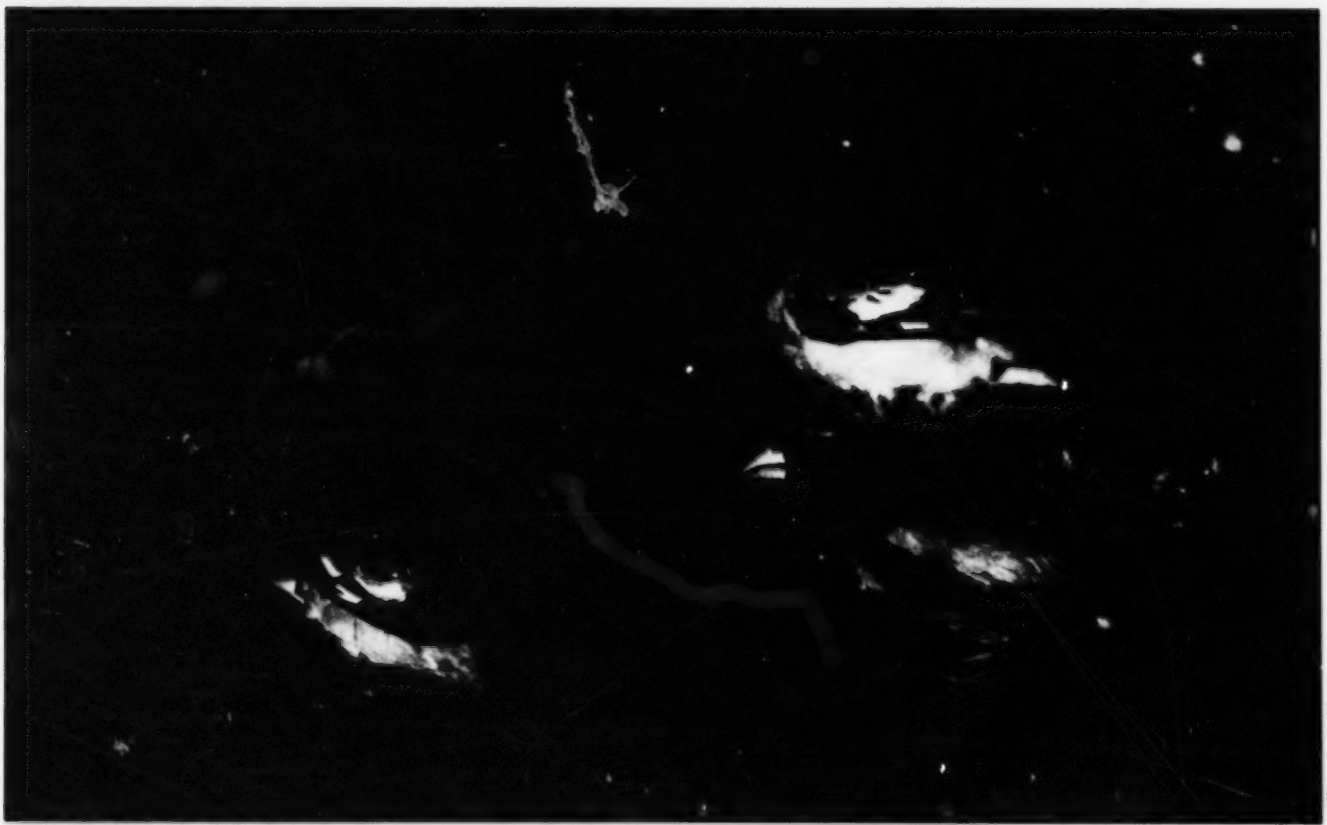
James M. Richards

Woodcock hunts earthworms at night.

James M. Richards

Male Indigo Bunting has his own individual song.

Donald R. Gunn



Evening Grosbeaks can crack cherry stones.

William Reynolds

Birds of the Winter

Winter in Algonquin is a long period of often deep snow and bitter cold. Most of our birds leave for warmer climates, and the wonder is that we have as many birds in winter as we do. The average number of species seen on the Christmas Bird Count in the Park is a surprising 27 (as opposed to the 115 that would be recorded by a comparable survey done in early June).

A few Park birds stay here all year round. Our two grouse, for example, are permanent residents, subsisting through the winter on buds and conifer needles; Ravens scour the landscape for animal carcasses; Gray Jays remember the locations of food tucked away the previous summer and fall; and chickadees somehow find enough insects and their eggs to sustain them through cold winter nights before resuming the search all over again the following morning.

The most spectacular winter birds, however, are those that visit the Park only in the cold months or that reach their greatest numbers at that season. Both Golden and Bald Eagles, for example, visit the Park in winter, looking for scraps left by wolves and depending on the size of our tree seed crops, a host of colourful northern finches may descend on the Park to capitalize on the winter bounty.

Red Crossbill

Loxia curvirostra

Bec-croisé rouge

Crossbills are among the world's most remarkable birds. As the name suggests and our photograph shows, the tips of the bill really do cross and for a very specific reason. Crossbills are specialized to extract seeds from the cones of coniferous trees, including pines, spruce, tamarack, and hemlock. To accomplish this the crossbill holds a nipped-off cone under one foot, inserts its bill tips under one of the scales, and then opens the bill — but ***sideways*** (rather than vertically the way mouths are usually opened). This sideways opening pries up the cone scale, exposing the seed underneath, and allows the bird to pluck it out with its tongue.

The relatively robust bill of the Red Crossbill adapts it to feeding on the large, strong cones of White and Red Pine. For this reason the Red Crossbill is more often found in Algonquin's east side pine country, although pine stands on the west side, like those in the Pog Lake and Two Rivers campgrounds, can be good places to look as well.

White-winged Crossbill

Loxia leucoptera

Bec-croisé à ailes blanches

The White-winged Crossbill has a thinner, less bulky bill than the previous species, making it more efficient at getting seeds out of smaller cones such as those of spruce and tamarack.

You might think that conifers would be entirely helpless when faced with the "attacks" of crossbills and that, notwithstanding the protection afforded by the cones, very few of their seeds would ever go uneaten. In fact, trees have evolved a way of partly thwarting seed predators like crossbills. Over broad areas, trees tend to produce few or no cones for several years in a row and then, all at once, to produce a truly enormous "bumper" crop. This has the effect of keeping crossbills at very low numbers during the poor cone years and then overwhelming the birds in the rare good years with far more cones than they can possibly handle.

Crossbills are highly nomadic, roaming the coniferous forests of North America in search of areas with big cone crops. When such an area develops, crossbill numbers quickly build up to enormous levels. The birds gorge themselves on the bonanza, and the air is filled with their songs as they pair off and nest, capitalizing on their good fortune to raise as many nestfuls of youngsters as they can — even when this happens in the middle of winter.

Huge seed crops are few and far between, but when they do happen they afford a magnificent natural spectacle of trees, cones, and crossbills that is not easily forgotten.

Pine Grosbeak

Pinicola enucleator

Dur-bec des pins

The Pine Grosbeak is one of only four birds discussed in this book that neither nests in the Park nor even occurs here in the summer.

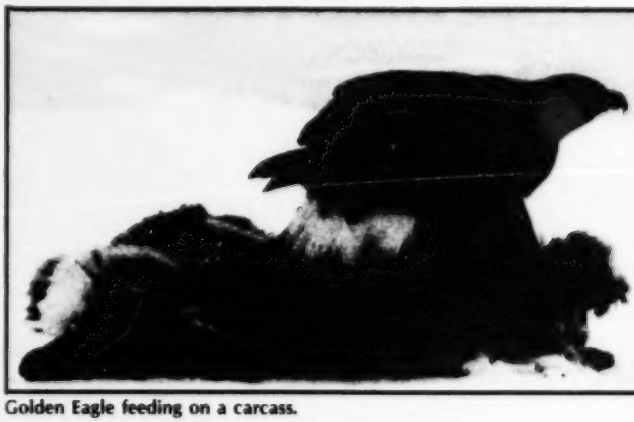
It is strictly a bird of the far northern boreal forests, which drifts down to Algonquin in the fall, usually appearing in late October and departing by late March. During the winter months their clear, warbled whistles and the rosy hues of the adult males add an especially appreciated touch of life and warmth. Often we see Pine Grosbeaks and other winter finches picking up grit right down on Highway 60. In their crops, the grit helps the birds grind up their vegetable food, which, in the case of Pine Grosbeaks, consists mostly of tree buds.

Unfortunately these winter visitors have little appreciation for what speeding cars can do to them, and many wait too long before taking flight. The carcasses are quickly picked up by Ravens that purposely patrol the highway, but we would rather see the Grosbeaks learn and live. Please do your part by blowing your horn whenever you see Pine Grosbeaks or any other winter finches on the road ahead of your car.

Golden Eagle

Aquila chrysaetos

Aigle royal



Golden Eagle feeding on a carcass.

From November to March, Golden Eagles are a regular, though scarce, visitor to Algonquin. No-one knows where they come from, but it must be from very far away. In spite of many rumours and much searching, the Golden Eagle has been found to nest at only half a dozen locations in Ontario (mostly near Hudson Bay), and the birds that visit us must come from northern Quebec or the Rocky Mountains.

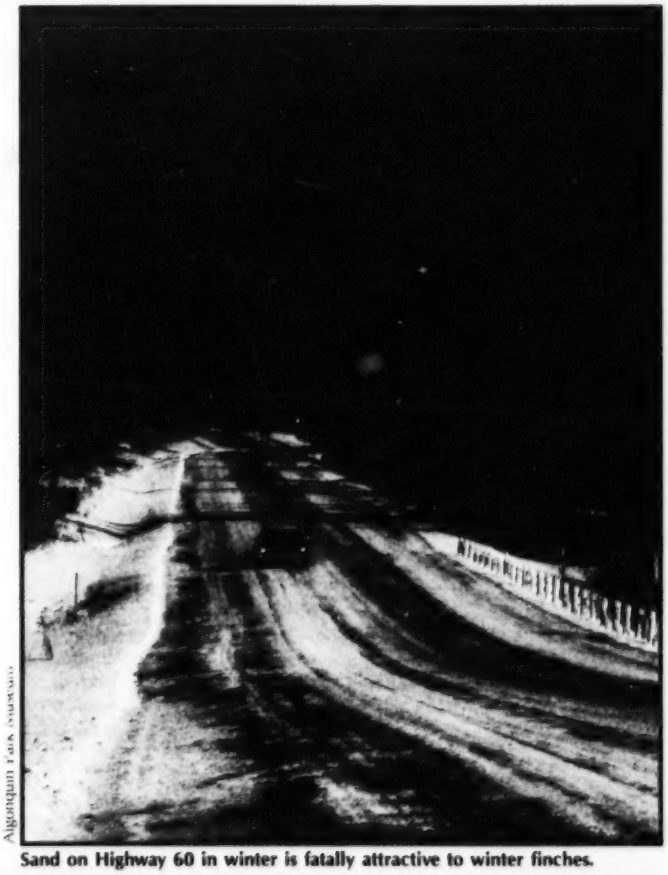
They drift over the frozen Park landscape in search of wolf-killed animals. Such carcasses sustain many meat-eating birds and mammals during the Algonquin winter. The powerful and enormous Golden Eagle is merely the most spectacular of the wolf's many beneficiaries.

Common Redpoll

Carduelis flammea

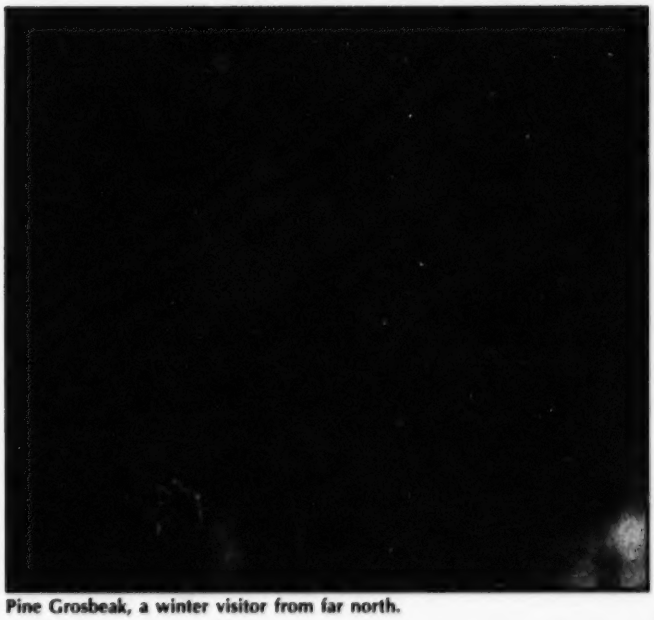
Sizerin flammé

Common Redpolls are slightly more predictable than our other winter finches in the sense that at least a few individuals visit the Park every winter. They originate from the Arctic tundra and northern fringes of the boreal forest where they feed on the seeds of willow, tamarack, alder, and especially birches. They keep this food preference when they visit us, and you are more likely to see them in areas of White Birch, particularly in winters when the birch seed crop has been good. Casual winter visitors to Algonquin are most likely to see Redpolls as flocks of small, not very striking brownish-white birds that fly up from the highway. But, as our picture shows, anyone who stops for a good look will be rewarded by the sight of a particularly attractive little visitor from the far north.



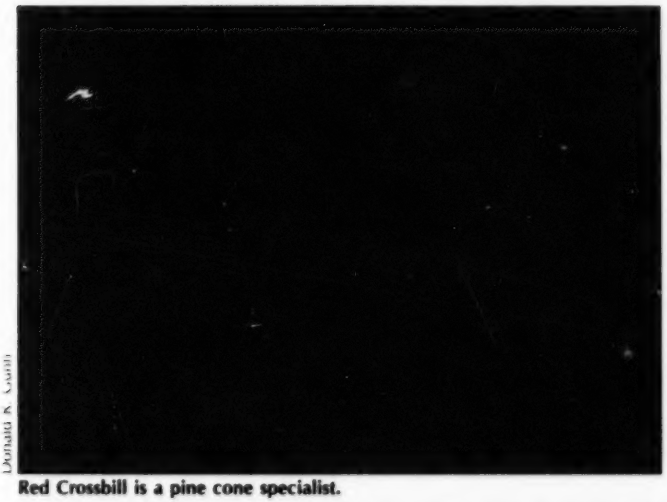
Algonquin Park Museum

Sand on Highway 60 in winter is fatally attractive to winter finches.



Michael W.P. Runtz

Pine Grosbeak, a winter visitor from far north.

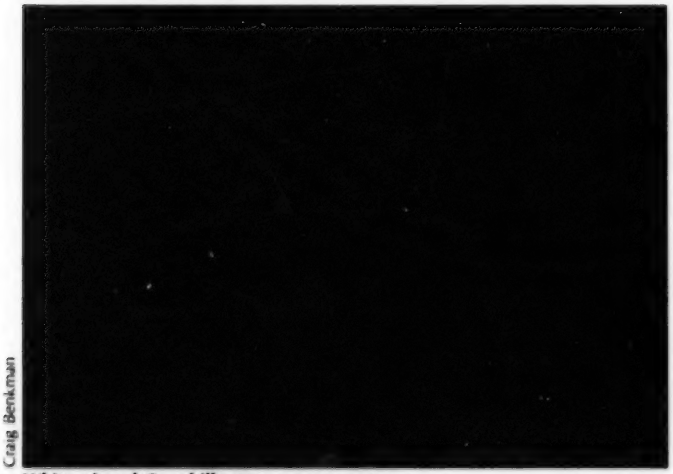


Michael W.P. Runtz

Red Crossbill is a pine cone specialist.

George K. Peck

Golden Eagles visit Park only in winter.



Craig Benkman

White-winged Crossbills open spruce cones.

Michael W.P. Runtz

Common Redpoll is fond of birch seed.

Birds of the Sky

All the birds of Algonquin can fly, but most use this power merely to move quickly from one point on the ground or in the forest to another. There are a few birds, however, that spend most of their waking lives in the air.

A couple are broad-winged masters of soaring flight that use the sky almost as a platform from which to survey the ground and look for dead animals. A couple more actually find enough insect food in the sky to live up there most of the time, scooping it up with their mouths. And, finally, Algonquin Park once had — and we hope will have once again — a magnificent bird of prey, the Peregrine Falcon, that made its living by snatching other birds from the air high over the wild Park landscape.

Turkey Vulture

Cathartes aura

Urubu à tête rouge

Many people are astonished to learn that vultures occur in Ontario, let alone Algonquin Park. The fact is, however, that this species, the Turkey Vulture, has occurred in the southern part of the province for a long time and in recent years has become quite regular in the Park as well. We have yet to find a nest and the number of individual birds is probably quite small, but those that are here are very conspicuous. Turkey Vultures spend all but the rainiest days high in the air where their great size and characteristic way of holding their wings in a shallow V make them easy to spot and to recognize. Watch one for a while and you will be amazed at how seldom they flap their wings, so efficient are they at riding the currents of warm air rising from the earth below.

Turkey Vultures almost literally use the air as a platform from which to search for dead animals. These are detected thanks to their extraordinarily sharp senses both of sight and smell. They also watch each other, and when one spots another vulture descending to earth it starts a long, fast glide to the spot where the first landed in hopes of getting in on a find of ripe carrion.

Common Nighthawk

Chordeiles minor

Engoulevent d'Amérique

Notwithstanding its name, the nighthawk is not a hawk at all but a member of a completely different family of birds that also includes the Whip-poor-will. Both birds have tiny, very weak bills and feet, but they do have enormous mouths well-suited for engulfing the flying insects that are their only food.

The Common Nighthawk is an evening flyer that seems to be thinly distributed throughout the Park. It is one of the last birds to arrive in spring and is usually gone by the end of August. Not only does it feed entirely on insects, but it seems to specialize exclusively on high-flying ones, for we usually see it swooping through the air a hundred metres or more above us. They are usually so high, in fact, that we probably wouldn't notice them at all were it not for the nighthawk's call — a short nasal buzz — and the long "sonic boom" produced by the bird's wings at the end of a long dive.

Nighthawks nest on the ground in exposed open areas such as rocky knolls or recent burns. They are remarkably well camouflaged — and need to be — when incubating in such exposed situations.

Chimney Swift

Chaetura pelagica

Martinet ramoneur

It seems quite likely that many people who come to enjoy the outdoor atmosphere of Algonquin have never noticed the Chimney Swift. Dark brown in colour and looking black against the sky, about the size of a swallow, flying at great speed with very rapid wingbeats, groups of from two to four swifts may be seen sweeping overhead any time from May to August. At times their wings seem to "twinkle" as if they were beating alternately — an impression echoed by the swift's twittering calls.

Everyone knows that many birds eat insects. What isn't so obvious is the extent to which insect-eating birds are specialized for the capture of different kinds of insect prey. Warblers and vireos specialize on insects found on twigs and foliage. Flycatchers sally forth from perches to seize flying insects in the forest. Swallows hunt on the wing, capturing other flying insects low over lakes and clearings. Swifts carry this trend to its extreme because they hunt high in the sky at tremendous speed.

In fact, Chimney Swifts almost never come to earth except to roost or nest in hollow trees or man-made equivalents, such as chimneys and buildings. The nest is a tiny shelf of twigs glued to the wall of the cavity or chimney with the swift's own saliva. They spend the winter in Peru.

Common Raven

Corvus corax

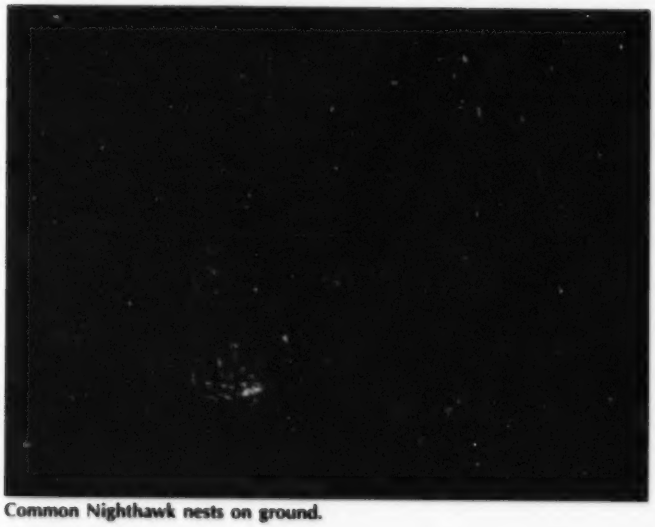
Grand Corbeau

Even experienced observers sometimes have trouble distinguishing Common Ravens from American Crows. Both birds are all black and shaped more or less the same, and, while ravens are definitely bigger, it is still hard to be sure which you are looking at when there is no suitable nearby size reference.

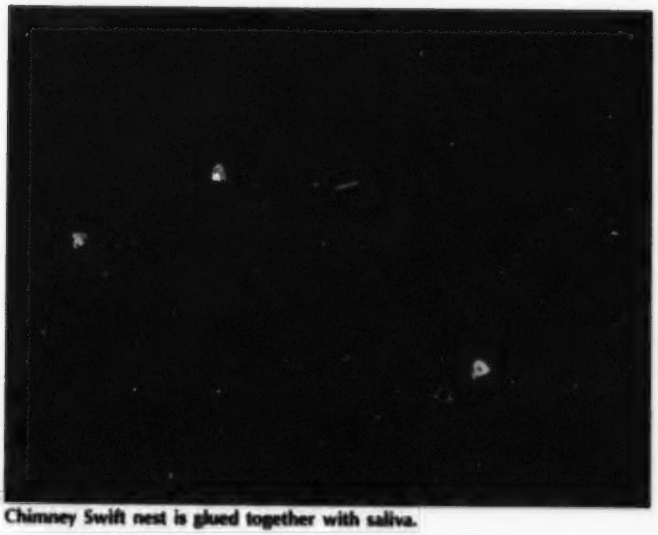
In voice and behaviour, however, the two species are quite different. Everybody knows the crow's "caw! caw!", but a raven moans or croaks — not to mention its extensive vocabulary of barks, yells, gurgles, and sometimes quite beautiful bell-like notes. Then, too, ravens are far more at home in the air than crows. They often soar on fixed wings high in the air (something that crows seldom do), and they also indulge in acrobatics — barrel rolls, "games of tag", even brief bouts of flying upside down — all apparently for the fun of it.

But the differences go far beyond this. Crows are usually restricted to areas of high human occupancy, and they leave the Park each fall. Ravens, on the other hand, are true permanent residents of Algonquin. No winter is so severe and no place so remote that we will not hear the harsh voice of passing ravens as they scour the country looking for the remains of wolf-killed deer. And every year, well before the snow has gone, long-lived raven pairs will refurbish their traditional nests on rocky cliff ledges or high up in tall trees. There they will raise their raucous broods on carrion gleaned from miles and miles of surrounding wilderness. By the time most birds have even returned from the south, the ravens have finished their nesting and are back in the sky soaring and croaking over wild landscapes.

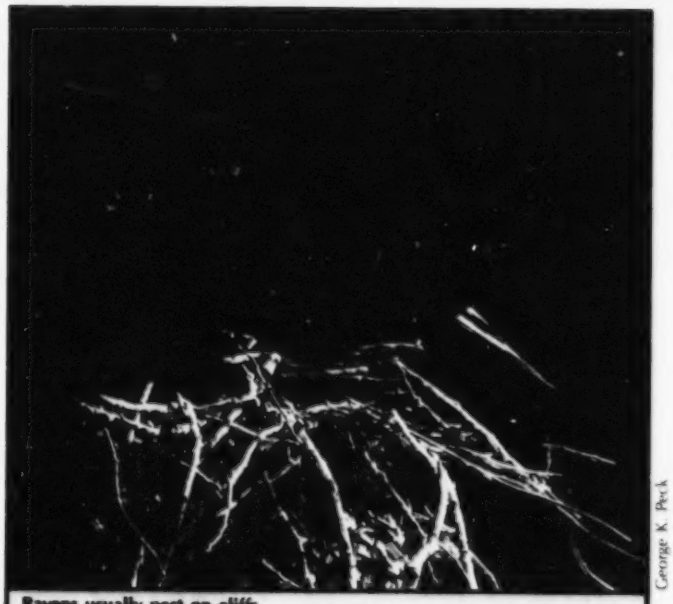
Turkey Vultures are pushing north into Park.



Common Nighthawk nests on ground.

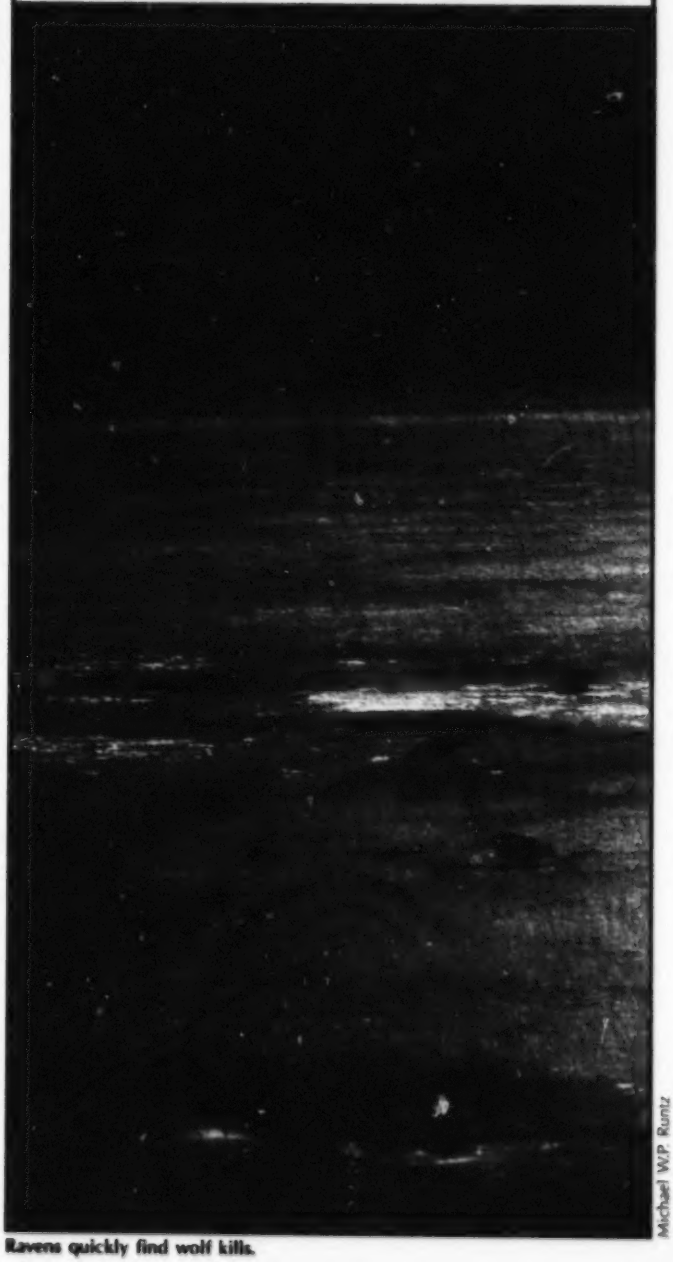


Chimney Swift nest is glued together with saliva.



George K. Peck

Ravens usually nest on cliffs.



Michael W.P. Runtz

Ravens quickly find wolf kills.

Merlin

Falco columbarius

Faucon émerillon

This small falcon is reknowned for its speed and agility in the air. It can exceed 80 km an hour, even in level flight, and there is apparently no bird it can't overtake — not even swifts or swallows. A Merlin may snatch its prey out of the air as it zooms past or kill it first with a blow from the feet and then circle back to retrieve it. A pursued bird can avoid death temporarily by a last second twisting or turning, but the Merlin will return for as many tries as it takes and only real hope of escape is for the intended prey to reach cover.

Notwithstanding its mastery of the air and seemingly effortless ability to capture food, the Merlin is actually quite rare in Algonquin. It nests almost exclusively on islands or peninsulas of large lakes such as Hogan, Kioshkokwi, or Lavieille. We think the reason for this scarcity is that the Merlin must have not only a good supply of birds but also wide-open spaces to use its high speed hunting techniques. There are many large openings (lakes) in Algonquin, but usually there is little reason for small forest birds to venture out into them and thereby become vulnerable to Merlins. Conditions are apparently only suitable in those rather rare situations where islands are separated from each other or the mainland by distances small enough to tempt crossings by small birds but still large enough for Merlins to operate effectively. One place that is apparently perfect for Merlins and where they nest almost every year is the group of islands at the top end of Lake Opeongo's South Arm. A trip up there in midsummer is often rewarded by the sight of these beautiful little raptors.

Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus

Faucon pèlerin

You might be very lucky and see a Peregrine Falcon from the Arctic migrating through Algonquin in the spring or fall, but you can't see any here in the summer. There was a time when you could, and we hope that this will be true again soon but, for the moment, the Peregrine is extinct as a breeding bird in the Park. The story of the Peregrine and why we have hopes for the future are matters we should all be aware of.

One of the world's most spectacular birds of prey, this falcon used to nest on cliff faces here and there in Algonquin. Every summer it hunted flying birds over the Park, ripping them from the sky after stupendous, 200 km per hour dives from high above. The Peregrine reigned supreme here and in most of the rest of the world as the ultimate flying machine evolved by nature.

Then, in the 1950s, something went wrong. First in Europe and then in North America, Peregrines started to disappear from cliff after cliff. The disturbing observation was made that before they disappeared for good, adult falcons laid thin-shelled eggs that cracked or otherwise failed to hatch. Research then showed that these grotesque reproductive failures were caused by DDT (or its breakdown products) picked up in the falcon's diet of smaller birds. Unfortunately, DDT is a very long-lasting poison and, when eaten by an animal, it tends to stay in that animal's body permanently. What was especially disastrous in the case of the Peregrine was that, with each prey item it consumed, the Peregrine got and, therefore, kept in its body the entire load of DDT that the prey had taken a whole lifetime to accumulate in its body. Thus, in a very short time, the level of DDT in a falcon's body could build up to 10–20 parts per million, which is sufficient to interfere with normal egg shell production.

Even more frightening was the realization that Peregrines could not find safety in parks or other wilderness areas. In Algonquin, for example, it didn't matter that very little DDT was ever used. Not only did the falcons have to leave the Park every winter for areas where DDT was used intensively, but also — even back in the Park during summer — the falcons were unknowingly eating birds that also had picked up DDT outside Algonquin during the winter. In fact, the last known Peregrine nesting in Algonquin was in 1962 — about the same time as the last nestings everywhere else in eastern North America.

The Peregrine, supreme aerial hunter.

The prospects of seeing eastern Peregrines ever again were very remote, and still would be, except for two things. First was that Cornell University in the U.S. and the Canadian Wildlife Service in this country obtained young birds of the southern race in the early 1970s from their last remaining population in the Rockies and undertook to keep the race alive by raising and breeding them in captivity. Second was the drastic curtailment of DDT use in 1969 and the consequent, although still slow, decline of DDT levels in many of the prey species traditionally taken by Peregrines.

Thus, re-introductions of the Peregrine to its former range became conceivable, and several agencies all over Canada and the U.S. pitched in. The idea was to take young falcons hatched in captivity, raise them at suitable places in the wild, and hope that they would learn to hunt, go off into the world as wild birds, and eventually pair up and nest. After that, the Peregrines would be raising young on their own, and there would be no further need for human involvement.

Because it was widely believed at the time that any young falcons that survived to breed would almost certainly make the attempt at the very same places where they had been raised, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources chose, for its contribution to the project, two traditional Peregrine nesting cliffs here in Algonquin. It was expensive because all supplies had to be flown in, but we wanted to give the young birds every possible advantage by encouraging attachment to sites that we knew wild Peregrines had successfully used in the past. That was how the Algonquin Peregrine project began and, from 1977 through 1986, our teams of dedicated falcon foster parents raised a total of 64 young Peregrines to the point, in August, where they could go off on their own, able to fend for themselves and begin their fall migration.

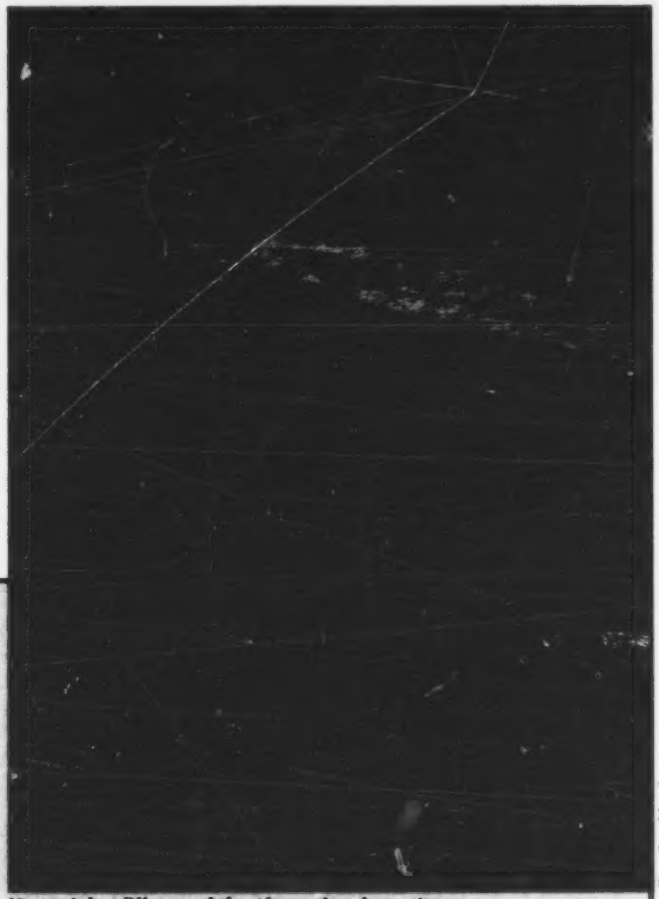
Although we knew that, as with many birds, only 20% of young falcons normally reach one year of age, we still had high hopes that the survivors among our birds would return to their release sites and set up housekeeping.

That this never happened was certainly a disappointment but not the calamity you might imagine. It turned out we were quite wrong about how faithful young falcons are to the cliffs they are raised on. Elsewhere, young birds were observed to return to where they were raised and then move on after a few hours or days. This could easily have happened here in Algonquin as well, but without the complete springtime surveillance that existed at some other sites, we would have had to be extraordinarily lucky to see even one brief reappearance by any of our birds.

Most important of all, there are now at least 50 pairs of Peregrine Falcons breeding in eastern North America — including many birds raised far from their eventual breeding sites. Ontario continues its release efforts but in cities where surveillance is easier and costs are much lower. It is everyone's hope that before long the Peregrine Falcon will be re-established as a breeding bird throughout Ontario — and certainly including Algonquin Park.

Donald R. Gunn

Park Merlins like to nest on islands.

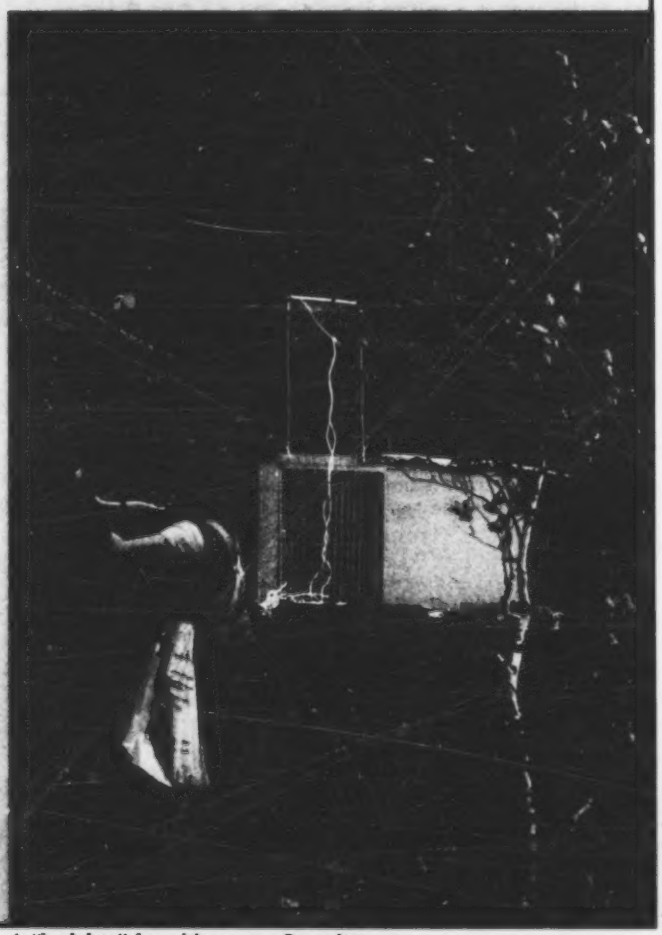


Dan Strickland

Hogan Lake cliff, one of the Algonquin release sites.

Algonquin Park Museum

Sixty-four young Peregrine Falcons were raised and released in Algonquin 1977-86.



Algonquin Park Museum

A "hack box" for raising young Peregrines.

George K. Peck

Adult Peregrine Falcon.

How to See Birds in Algonquin Yourself

We hope you have enjoyed this book on the birds of Algonquin, but we also hope that it will be merely the first step in your own personal discovery of the Park's fascinating bird life. In this regard we are happy to offer the following advice and further references.

Where and When

Although there are birds to be seen in Algonquin at all seasons of the year, the best time is late May through early July. This is the nesting season of our birds, which means that they are in their brightest plumage of the year, and the males are actively proclaiming their territories through persistent singing. This enables you to detect and track down birds that otherwise would be quite invisible. In fact, most birders identify as many or more birds by song than by sight. Obviously, many more birds are heard than seen in heavily forested country like Algonquin, so it helps to pay attention to every unfamiliar song you hear. Even if you don't have an ear for music, it is surprising how many bird songs you can learn to recognize with a little persistence. Before you know it, you will be able to identify several dozen species by song alone.

A good way to get started in the process of learning birds by sight and song is to come along on the early morning hikes offered during the summer by the Park Visitor Services Programme. Through the use of tape-recorded songs, the naturalist leading the hike will entice many common Algonquin songsters into plain view. The naturalist will also give you tips on how to identify birds correctly, and a great deal of information about how the birds make a living in the Algonquin environment.

This can be a big help to a beginner, but there is still no substitute for getting out and observing birds on your own. For this, all you really need is a pair of binoculars (in the 7 to 10 power range), a bird guide (some of which are listed below), and a little patience. That's how all the bird experts got started, and you can do it too!

The Complete Algonquin Park Bird Checklist

In this book we have endeavoured to introduce you to 77 of the most representative Algonquin birds. The complete Park list, however, includes more than twice this number. In fact, as of spring 1990, fully 258 kinds of birds had been recorded in the Park at least once.

For birders wishing to know the status in Algonquin of all these birds, including average and extreme arrival and departure dates, abundance, and breeding status, we recommend No. 9 in the Park's series of technical bulletins, *Checklist and Seasonal Status of the Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park*. The bulletin provides all this information at a glance and enables the birder to quickly discover the significance of any observation he or she makes.

Identification Guides

There are many excellent bird identification guides available nowadays (including at the Friends of Algonquin Park bookstore located at the Park Museum). Here are a few that we can recommend:

1. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, Second Edition.
   National Geographic Society, 1987.
2. *Birds of North America*, revised edition.
   By C.S. Robbins, B. Bruun, and H.S. Zim.
   Golden Press, New York. 1983.
3. *A Field Guide to the Birds* (east of Rockies).
   by Roger Tory Peterson, 1980.
   Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.

Bird Behaviour

When you have learned how to identify birds you will be ready to go on to observe their fascinating behaviour — and perhaps make your own original discoveries. Here are a few books that will help you:

1. *The Birder's Handbook*
   By P.R. Ehrlich, D.S. Dobkin, and D. Wheye, 1988.
   Simon and Schuster, New York.
2. *Watching Birds*
   By Roger F. Pasquier, 1977.
   Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.
3. *A Guide to Bird Behavior* (Volumes I, II, and III)
   By Donald W. Stokes, 1979, 1983, 1989.
   Little Brown and Co., Boston, Toronto.

Bird Recordings

Recordings of bird songs are an excellent help in learning which birds make which songs, and many people enjoy listening to them simply for the intrinsic beauty of bird music. Here is a range of titles (again these are available at the bookstore in the Park Museum):

Guides to Bird Songs

1. *A Field Guide to Bird Songs of Eastern and Central North America* (second edition).
   Songs and calls of over 200 species recorded in the field, arranged to accompany the fourth edition of Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds* (available in cassette or record format).
   Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.
2. *Guide to Bird Sounds.*
   For use with the National Geographic Society's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (in cassette format).
   Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. 1985.
3. *Birding by Ear: A guide to bird song identification* (booklet and 3 casssettes).
   by Richard K. Walton and Robert W. Lawson.
   Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. 1989.
4. *Songs of Spring* (Sounds of Nature, Vol. 1, Songs of 25 Common Songbirds, cassette).
   By W.W.H. Gunn and D.J. Borror.
   Federation of Ontario Naturalists.
5. *Warblers* (Sounds of Nature, Vol. 4, record).
   Songs of Warblers of Eastern North America.
   Recorded by D.J. Borror and W.W.H. Gunn.
   Federation of Ontario Naturalists.
6. *Finches* (Sounds of Nature, Vol. 6, record).
   Songs of Fringillidae of Eastern and Central North America.
   Federation of Ontario Naturalists.
7. *Thrushes, Wrens and Mockingbirds* (Sounds of Nature, Vol. 8, record).
   By D.J. Borror and W.W.H. Gunn.
   Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

Algonquin Park Recordings

1. *A Day in Algonquin Park* (record)
   Wildlife sounds, including loons.
   Recorded by W.W.H. Gunn.
   Federation of Ontario Naturalists.
2. *Algonquin Park* (cassette)
   Wildlife sounds from Ontario's famous park.
   Recorded by Monty Brigham.
   R.M.P. Biological Ltd.
3. *Voices of Algonquin Park* (cassette).
   (Loons, Barred Owls, wolves, and moose).
   Friends of Algonquin Park, Whitney, Ontario.

Loon Recordings

(see also No.'s 1 and 3 above)

1. *Voices of the Loon* (cassette)
   Recorded by William Barklow.
   North American Loon Fund.
2. *Listen to the Loons* (cassette, Solitudes, Vol. 12)
   Produced by Dan Gibson.
   Don Gibson Productions Ltd., Toronto.
3. *Loons* (video cassette).
   Northwest Inc., Ashland, Wis.

Algonquin Park Publications

This book is only one of many publications published in cooperation with the Ministry of Natural Resources by The Friends of Algonquin Park. The Friends is an independent registered charitable organization with a volunteer board of directors and was established in 1983 to assist the Park with its educational and interpretive programs.

The following is a list of other Friends publications available at our two bookstores located at the Park Museum and the Pioneer Logging Exhibit or by writing to the address below.

	(1990) Price
MAPS	
Canoe Routes of Algonquin Provincial Park	$2.75
Backpacking Trails of Algonquin Provincial Park	1.50
BOOKS	
Fishing in Algonquin Provincial Park	$1.50
Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park	2.95
Mammals of Algonquin Provincial Park	1.50
Reptiles and Amphibians of Algonquin	1.00
Pictorial History of Algonquin Provincial Park	1.50
Wildflowers of Algonquin Provincial Park	2.50
Mushrooms of Algonquin Provincial Park	2.50
Trees of Algonquin Provincial Park	2.95
TRAIL GUIDES	
Whiskey Rapids Trail	$0.35
Hardwood Lookout Trail	0.35
Mizzy Lake Trail	0.35
Peck Lake Trail	0.35
Hemlock Bluff Trail	0.35
Two Rivers Trail	0.35
Lookout Trail	0.35
Booth's Rock Trail	0.35
Spruce Bog Boardwalk	0.35
Beaver Pond Trail	0.35
Barron Canyon Trail	0.35
Brent Crater Trail	0.35
TECHNICAL BULLETINS	
No. 1. Checklist of the Butterflies of Algonquin	$0.75
No. 2. Checklist of the Bryophytes of Algonquin	0.50
No. 3. Wolf Howling in Algonquin Provincial Park	0.75
No. 4. Checklist of the Vascular Plants of Algonquin	1.00
No. 5. Acid Rain in Algonquin Provincial Park	1.00
No. 6. Checklist of the Conspicuous Fungi of Algonquin	0.75
No. 7. Checklist of the Lichens of Algonquin	0.50
No. 8. Chronology of Algonquin Provincial Park	1.00
No. 9. Checklist and Seasonal Status of the Birds of Algonquin P. Park	1.25

Published by

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